

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

“You’ve Gotta Know Your Limits”

by DAVID A. OATIS

Director, Northeastern Region, USGA Green Section

THE ISSUE of putting green speed never seems to go away, does it? Golfers won't mention it for a week or a month, or possibly even for an entire season. Sooner or later, though, golfers are reminded of the green speed issue and the topic rears its ugly head once again. Of course, there is also the issue of hole locations. Golfers rarely complain about hole locations when greens are slow to medium in pace, but the faster the greens are, the more frequently golfers cry foul! I think some superintendents can probably gauge the speed of their greens by the number of hole location complaints they are receiving. It is every superintendent's nightmare that, on the day when the greens are a little faster, a hole gets placed in a more contoured area. Play is slowed by three- and four-putt (or more) greens and the golfers leave frustrated and angry!

Golfers often remember having been able to use certain portions of greens for hole locations years ago, and “settling” is frequently blamed for the severe contours that now leave some areas unusable. However, the truth is that most of today's putting greens are being managed at speeds significantly faster than was the practice 15, 20, or more years ago, and today's speeds are far in excess of what the greens were originally designed for. In many cases, this results in poor playability and severe agronomic problems.

I believe that the original architectural design should be carefully studied before a desired green speed range is decided upon. You see, most greens have an architectural limit for green speed, but often it is ignored. This refers to the speed above which a significant number of hole locations become unfair and cannot be used. Often these are some of the most challenging ones. For example, a severely contoured green would have a much lower architectural limit than a more level green would.

Exceeding the architectural speed limit shrinks the amount of usable cupping area on a green, and it robs golfers of playing to challenging hole locations that the golf course architect designed into the green. If



Identify the architectural speed limit of a green and establish a policy of obeying that limit.

the limit is exceeded infrequently, the agronomic impact is likely to be negligible. However, exceeding the limit on a regular basis can cause a number of problems, such as increased disease, wear, compaction, weed invasion pressure, etc. It also reduces course setup options. Despite the best efforts of a turf manager, poor playability usually results, since increased traffic leads to thin, worn turf and bumpier putting surfaces. In fact, it is often easy to identify the usable cupping areas on a green because the wear is obvious and these areas usually have a greater percentage population of annual bluegrass. The lesser-used portions are almost always smoother and have more creeping bentgrass in them.

The solution, then, is to identify the architectural speed limit for your course and possibly even for each individual green on it. Inherent agronomic problems should also be considered, as should the desires of the majority of the golfers. A policy for green speed based on agronomics, architecture, and golfer desires should then be developed. Though not recommended from the stand-

point of maintaining consistency, it is acceptable to maintain one or two greens a bit slower than the others if they are unplayable at the higher speeds demanded for the other greens. Putting green reconstruction for the sake of green speed is not advised in most instances.

I firmly believe that *the architectural speed limit of a green should not be exceeded on a regular basis*. When the limit is surpassed, the more contoured areas of greens obviously cannot be used. Conversely, I believe it is essential to *make a point of using the more precarious hole locations when the limit is not being exceeded*. This will provide the *challenge and enjoyment* envisioned by the golf course architect, and it will provide interesting new variations in course setup for the golfers. It will even make slower greens seem faster.

Both committee members and golf course superintendents need to know their courses' limitations when determining green speed guidelines. These guidelines, along with the rationale behind their development, should then be communicated to the golfers.