

# IT'S THE RUB OF THE GREEN

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*Some thoughts from an Agronomist . . .  
who also happens to be a scratch golfer.  
Editor*

**I**n the United States today, according to figures compiled by the National Golf Foundation, 12 million people play golf 15 or more times during each year. Other information provided by the NGF tells us we have approximately 12,000 golf courses in this country. Of these, about 42 per cent are private clubs. The remaining 58 per cent are either daily fee or municipal-type operations. No matter where the game is played, a tremendous amount of golf is going on today.

Every round presents some form of challenge to the individual golfer. The setting may vary from a wooded, mountainous golf course to a wind-swept links or a lighted par-3 in a metropolitan area. Although the location may change, each course, each hole, and each shot presents a challenge to each golfer. I am not at all sure, however, that each golfer realizes the role good golfing turf plays in his enjoyment of the game.

The golf course superintendent, the golf professional and the manager can and do affect the

quality of the challenge of the golf course. This is not to say that every golf course should be set up to the standards of the United States Open. However, they should be set up to require a certain amount of skill in playing the game. Richard S. Tufts, former President of the USGA, has said,

"A golfer must expect variations caused by terrain, by constant use, and the changing conditions of the growing things. That's all a part of the challenge, it's the rub of the green aspect that makes golf the challenging and exciting game that it is."

It is the job of the superintendent, the golf professional and the manager to educate the golfer, not only on how to play the game, but about the surface on which the game is played. I feel it is just as important for the golfer to understand and appreciate good playing surfaces as it is to be educated on the proper etiquette of the golf game.

How many times have you heard "the greens are getting hard; what you need to do is water them more," or "the rough is getting too high; I had a shot that went into the rough the other day, and I had no chance to reach the green," or "that fairway bunker has to be redesigned; if you hit the ball into it, you have no chance to get it to

*Marking the course properly helps the players.*





*Golfers improving lie on fairway, and riding the carts that make it necessary.*

the green," or "the pin placement on No. 7 green was illegal. There was no way that I could hit the ball at the flag because, if I miss the shot just a little, I would be in the water"? These are all comments that are heard time and time again by golf course superintendents and green committee chairmen. These comments all refer to elements of the game that are part of the "rub of the green" to which Tufts referred.

There is nothing in the Rules of Golf that says you have to be able to reach the green if you knock the ball into the rough, or that you have to be able to shoot straight at the flagstick, or that every "good" shot hit onto the green must hold the green. These are factors that are influenced by the conditioning of the golf course and the quality of the challenge. The USGA had the foresight to recognize these types of challenges and has established a USGA Golf Handicap System. The system is based on a course rating and is used to handicap players so that, although the players differ in ability, they should be able to play on an equal basis.

Many of the nation's 12 million golfers are not as familiar with the reason behind the handicap system as they might be. They are playing the game at a time when "preferred lies" or "winter rules" are the rule as opposed to the exception to the rule. Everything the new golfer has been exposed to at the golf course is geared to improve his game. He has been exposed to all the new improved equipment that makes the ball supposedly fly straighter or go farther than any other ball. The golfer's entire way of thinking has been changed to where the equipment and the course should be maintained to suit his game, not that, heaven forbid, he should have to adjust his game to suit the course's conditions. Today's golfer has come to believe, "If it's green, it's good, and a lush golf course is a prerequisite to a good score."

Many golfers today believe course conditioning and their own expensive equipment should and will compensate for their playing deficiencies. The 20 handicapper stands at the 150 yard marker

(placed there by his request) with a downhill lie. He not only expects his ball to hold the green (just like Johnny Longknocker's ball did when he hit an 8 iron from the same position), but also expects it to stop immediately. If the high handicapper's ball does not hold the green, it is not because of any fault of his — it's because the greens are too hard. Of course, the club's professional staff will hear about this as soon as he returns to the clubhouse.

Unfortunately, Mr. High Handicapper's complaints are often taken too much to heart. Surely, all members' complaints, no matter how small, are to be listened to, but if the greens are going to be watered more often just to make them hold, the quality of the turf will suffer. I have yet to observe a golf course that has a good quality playing surface that has lowered its standards to appease the higher handicapped golfer.

The putting greens are generally the first to receive criticism. It is the nature of the way golf is played. Approach shots are hit to every green and, according to par, two putts are allowed on every green. This means the putting surface has to be of good quality. The majority of the strokes in the game are taken there. However, and this must be kept in mind, the putting green is not so much a landing area as it is a putting surface. To provide the best possible putting surface, every effort must be made to keep the green firm and the putting surface fast and true. Any break of the green must be influenced solely by the contours of the green and not by top growth. Therefore, a good putting surface does not display the characteristics of a good landing area. Mechanical operations, such as spiking and top-dressing, will greatly assist in developing a true putting surface. They will also assist in providing a surface that has some resilience to it, so that the properly played golf shot will hold the green.

Invariably, the height of cut will enter into a discussion on the quality of the putting surface. The frequency of cut can do just as much or more to improve the quality of the putting surface as the

height of cut. By mowing greens daily, they can be groomed and the growth on the surface controlled. Of course, the amount of nutrition and the amount of water the greens receive also have a tremendous effect on putting quality. A green that is slow but consistently growing is much easier to maintain. By controlling nitrogen on greens and keeping them on the hungry side, a better quality putting surface can be realized. There is no great secret that a turf maintained under light but frequent fertility causes far fewer problems than a green with a fast, lush growth.

It might be well to consider the benefits of slow but steady growth for grass on the greens. Number One, if the grass is growing slower and we mow it more frequently, there will be fewer clippings with which we must deal. Number Two, a slow-growing turf will have a more rigid blade and will be easier to groom into upright growth. Number Three, a slow-growing plant will have a thinner blade which will stand up under traffic stress. And Fourth, it will provide a better playing surface.

Maintaining a firm, true putting surface may not win for the superintendent the neighborhood badge for the greenest green, but more than likely it will put your club in the position of being known as a club that has a golf course. Please understand, I am not trying to leave the impression that the putting greens alone make a golf course. That is not so. We all know they are only a portion of it. The fairways, roughs, bunkers and other hazards, as well as the tees are all part of the whole. The condition of these areas must also be maintained with a high degree of professional skill if one is to have a challenging course.

With the inception of "preferred lies," the new golfer has come to think of a fairway as that area between the roughs where the ball may be moved,

teed up and made ready for the next shot. Harry W. Easterly, Jr., President of the USGA, refers to them as "those insidious Winter Rules." How many of today's golfers realize the tremendous improvement in the quality of fairway turf over 20 years ago? With the strides that have been taken and the amount of money spent today on maintaining the fairway, the professional staff at the club should be doing everything in its power to convince the members that they have excellent fairway playing surfaces. Again, winter rules are only another step in the direction of eliminating the "Rub of The Green" from the game.

If today's golfer insists on preferred lies, a great deal of money could be saved in golf course maintenance. This could be done with minimal fertilizer on the fairway, no water, and mowing fairways twice a week whether needed or not. This would greatly reduce the maintenance costs and give the golfer a reason to move the ball.

A quality golf surface that is well-groomed can be maintained with a reasonable budget and will provide an excellent quality playing surface. There is no need for preferred lies. On the other hand, a lush, highly manicured layout can give the appearance of a quality playing surface, but still not provide the essential ingredients of a good golf course.

The club's professional staff can make a significant contribution to golf by providing leadership for the members in determining what constitutes a good golf course and good playing conditions. They should focus on the individual golfer's talent. They should stress that good course conditioning complements those talents and should not be expected to compensate for a deficiency in them. And then, after all is said and done, that single most exciting and challenging quality of the game will be preserved; "The Rub of The Green."

*"That'll teach that bunker to make me miss a shot."*

