



Dr. Ralph Engel (right) of Rutgers University, and Joe Spang, superintendent at the Rutgers Golf Course, observing results with the Stimpmeter.

# Some (More) Thoughts on Putting Green Speed

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**Editor's Note:** *There have been several articles on the Stimpmeter and putting green speeds in recent issues of the RECORD. Here is another well worth reading. It expresses some interesting views not earlier presented.*

**T**HE SPEED OF putting greens is never settled to the satisfaction of the great assortment of golfers. Commonly, professionals and low handicap players request fast greens, and some high handicap players accept them as the style. Moderately fast greens are usually popular, but a few golfers prefer slow greens.

The demand for fast greens has increased greatly in recent years. Some of this change is due to the Stimpmeter, which is an inexpensive, simple, and quick tool. This device has become a standard measure, and it has led to frequent com-

parison of green speed on individual courses and between courses.

If anyone asks if greens on today's golf courses are faster than in recent years, the answer is yes. Twenty to twenty-five years ago, the mowing height was typically 1/4-inch. Presently, a majority of courses set their mowers at 3/16-inch or closer. In addition to this change, thinner bedknives make 3/16-inch a closer cut than formerly. Along with these changes, double or triple mowing is practiced occasionally.

How do golfers react to speedier greens? Personally, I find moderately fast greens add interest to the game. A true roll with a gentle touch is a pleasure. There are those who say very fast greens put too much emphasis on putting. It becomes a question of what is too fast. Possibly greens are too fast when good putters develop anxiety over this phase

of the game. When a putt falls out of its arc on a mild slope and increases speed in another direction, putting is scarcely fun. The USGA classification of green speeds by the Stimpmeter is considered good and seems realistic to me. The following table shows what the USGA considers reasonable for different types of courses.

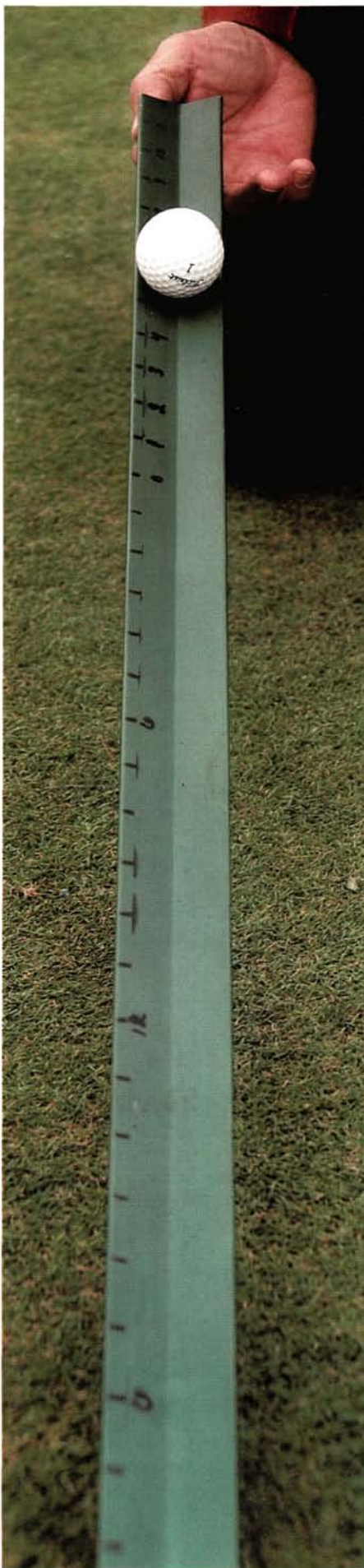
	Regular Membership Play	Tournament Conditions
Fast	102"	126"
Medium Fast	90"	114"
Medium	78"	102"
Medium Slow	66"	90"
Slow	54"	78"

A seldom asked question is, "How has the shift to fast greens changed green maintenance?" It has narrowed the margin between green survival and failure. Closer mowing causes shorter roots, increases summer soil temperatures, and the thinner turf encourages more weed problems (which increases the need to risk herbicide use). It has caused a shift from moderate use to too much nitrogen in the past to very low rates of nitrogen. It seems a slight increase in growth causes a noticeable drop in the "bare floor" speeds of the faster greens. Some golf course superintendents are inclined to omit the minimal nitrogen needs rather than risk the wrath of the golfer. The major problems with low nitrogen are: 1. more weeds (including moss) and 2. more blemishes which show on the grass because they heal slowly. Without new growth that can be mowed into a smooth surface, the demand for closer cut increases.

**I**T IS POSSIBLE that very close mowing has opened the door to some additional problems. Trouble with a bacterium has been suspected. A major turf failure occurred in another region recently that received little agreement from a series of turf experts. It is possible these problems are the result of new diagnostic facilities for discovering things that are new or were overlooked in the past. However, close mowing causes a weaker turf that is subject to more temperature stress and is likely to permit problems that did not occur in the past.

The golf course superintendent and other turf professionals are willing to provide whatever the golfer likes, if it is feasible without excessive failures. In the spring, next summer's turf loss is farthest from the golfer's mind, but late August always finds some clubs greatly distressed. Winter injury may seem far away, but extremely close mowing will increase this problem. Needless to say, no one suffers more than the golf course superintendent when turf fails.

As with the song from *Oklahoma!* closer-cut has gone as far as it can go. There is a point of no return. Some of the courses with very heavy traffic, especially public courses, need growth on the greens for the turf to recover and survive. Also, where is the point when



an increase in green speed makes putting an experience in anxiety rather than a form of relaxation?

The Stimpmeter has received mixed acceptance by golf course superintendents. The pluses are: 1. It is an impersonal and objective measurement that should prevent irate golfers from making exaggerated statements about speed of the greens; 2. its use has shown that various uncontrollable factors prevent uniform speed at all times; 3. it is a simple and quick tool; and 4. it is an encouragement for the club to agree on a green speed that keeps the golf club and superintendent out of wasteful and harmful controversy.

The Stimpmeter becomes a liability or a cause of resentment when: 1. Some golfers expect precise green speed from day to day which is not possible; 2. the increased green speed causes more precarious maintenance of greens; 3. it encourages such things as petty daily checking, posting of green speed, and requests for special mowing for everyday golf (the superintendent and the maintenance crew often find completion of six or seven mowings per week in all kinds of weather very difficult and demanding without these details); and 4. some clubs would spend time and money on excesses with the Stimpmeter and fail to overcome greater imperfections.

**S**OME SUGGESTIONS for those who would use the Stimpmeter or strive for very fast greens are:

1. For everyday play, limit the Stimpmeter's use to several times per season to determine if the speed falls within a reasonable range. Except on rare occasions, avoid fussy frequent checking for a consistent precise speed.

2. Most club tournaments do not justify checking green speed and use of extra mowing.

3. Avoid abrupt lowering of the height of cut to increase speed — this applies, especially in late spring and summer, when the safety margin for turf survival is very thin already.

4. On courses where turf survival on greens is marginal, greens rated fast (8 feet and above) may be a mistake.

5. A given club should avoid extremes of speed and hopefully stay within a reasonable norm for similar courses.