



Expensive towers and equipment rise up on the golf course landscape to give the best vantage point for coverage.

THE MEDIA AND THE GAME OF GOLF

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TELEVISION viewing of golf events has reached huge proportions, with millions of people watching golf on TV each year. The U.S. Open Championship gained full coverage of all 18 holes of the final two rounds in 1977. Over 9.9 million people viewed the last half hour of the 1993 U.S. Open! Every major television network will carry some type of golf event this year. The American golfer watches televised golf in numbers greater than in all of history.

Golf on TV is covered by announcers with various backgrounds, from football player to sportswriter to professional golfer. Devout viewers receive much of their education on the game from these announcers and, therefore, they (the announcers) have tremendous influence on the way many golfers think.

The game depends upon accurate interpretation of the Rules and precise definitions of terms. However, many announcers, playing the role of ringmaster, are carelessly using terminology that is confusing and inaccurate.

A new generation of golfers, educated by TV, is emerging on the scene.

It seems the game of golf has taken on an air of almost "blood sport" proportions, the combatants being the players and the golf course! The judge and jury are the media — particularly the television analysts and commentators. No longer does a player's ball *roll* across the green — the ball "releases." Approach shots do not stop quickly — they "check."

On a recent telecast, viewers were told the "greens aren't releasing." It's as if the *green* was an active participant playing the role of opponent! The announcer leads the viewer to believe the green chose not to cooperate with the golfer. Imagine that! One would not dare insinuate that perhaps the golfer did not hit it . . . hard enough! The truth is, the player, not the green, is the source of the deficiency.

It is amazing how the laws of nature change during golf tournaments. For example: Winds don't blow — they swirl. Balls don't

roll one way or the other because of surface slope and gravity — grain makes this happen. Greens don't become drier as the day goes by — they become crusty. I've been a golf course superintendent for 25 years and I've never seen a crusty green. Firm, yes. Dry, yes. But crusty? Burnt toast is crusty.

I am sure commentators and other media people do their best to describe what takes place in a way that is interesting to viewers, listeners, and readers. The incorrect use of adjectives and other technical agronomic terms, however, is hardly professional.

There seems to be an almost sycophantic relationship between the media and the players. The announcers place great stock in the professional golfers' assessments of golf course conditions and events. Case in point: A very popular professional golfer stated he would not have played in the PGA Championship at Inverness if he had known the greens would be as slow as he thought they

Viewers and listeners want to see the action and hear about it too. They depend upon the commentators' remarks.





Professional golfers' assessments of golf course conditions and events have a significant impact on commentators, the media, and spectators.

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were. In his opinion, they were “too slow” for a major championship.

Some years ago, a famous golfer exclaimed he did not play in the Pleasant Valley Golf Classic in Sutton, Massachusetts, because the fairways, at the time, were Kentucky bluegrass, not bentgrass! (The fact is, there was almost no Kentucky bluegrass in the fairways, but lots of annual bluegrass — the same grass that dominated the fairways at most other PGA Tour stops in the North! — Editor).

The media accept these statements as if the player has infallible knowledge and authority. As a result, the player feels a power to persuade the masses, and the focus by others becomes the golf course and the playing conditions. The axiom “play the ball as it lies” no longer is the theme of golf. Golfers have become catered-to athletes.

Grain on greens, particularly during the early part of the Tour schedule, is the num-

ber-one topic of announcers. Grain can cause golf balls to defy the laws of gravity! Grain, for the record, is the direction or arrangement of grass leaf blades, often forming a pattern. During the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic, played on different courses in the Palm Springs area, viewers were frequently reminded that putts will break toward the close-by community of Indio. Viewers were also informed that the grain grows toward the setting sun, and therefore will affect the route of putts. Further, they were told putts will break away from the mountains. Now, if Indio is east of the tournament site, and the sun sets west of the same site, and the closest mountains are located south . . . which way will the putt break?

Surely the slope of the green has the most significant influence on the direction of the breaking putt, not the mystical forces emanating from the mountains, the sun, or downtown Indio! Golfers tell me that they

are sure putts can break uphill because of grain even on triple-mowed tournament turf cut at $\frac{1}{64}$ of an inch! I wonder where they got that idea?

Being critical of the media is easy, especially of those on television. Their job must be more difficult than it looks, and to be dragged over the coals for the slightest mistake must be frustrating. However, one of their missions is to provide insight and factual information to the viewer. The “isms” spoken with authority are well beyond my ability to understand their origins. One commentator stated, “The grain’s moving left to right, toward the setting sun. He [the player] played quickly. The grain got him.”

Does this mean if he had played more slowly the grain would not have gotten him? Or does it mean the grain prevented the putt from falling in the hole? Either way, it seems the grain, not the player, had the most influence upon the ball.

I've often wondered — if the grain grows toward the setting sun, is there a period when it also grows toward the rising sun? And if it does, at what point in the day, or evening, does it reverse direction from growth toward the setting sun to growth toward the rising sun?

How's this one: "You can't see it or feel it . . . but it's there!" This was an analyst's observation on grain during a major Tour event. I wonder how this analyst would react if I told him the sidehill-downhill putt he was about to attempt really didn't break downhill on the sidehill. Rather, it broke uphill on the downhill because, though he couldn't see it or feel it, there was a mound on the sidehill that would cause his ball to break uphill. I'm sure my observation would be dismissed, if not my sanity questioned.

But, here is an analyst who can make an unfounded or inaccurate observation and have those listening accept it as Gospel. This is especially true if they are professionals from the Tour.

I've had golfers tell me what is said on TV must be true because professional golfers

know such things. Many golfers assume, or believe, that professional golfers are well versed in agronomy. When I point out that this is not usually true, they're amazed. Some, I feel, don't readily accept this premise and probably never will. But driving a car does not make you an automobile mechanic. Does it?

The most disconcerting aspect of the incorrect information supplied by some commentators and writers is the effect it has on golf course superintendents and their profession. Although a statement like "the grain took it" may seem innocuous, it is truly amazing how golfers can believe the reason a putt behaves strangely is because of the grain they heard about last weekend on TV. Of course, grain did not affect putts to the extent it now does until commentators used it as an excuse for missed putts.

The seemingly incessant harping about the grain, particularly on overseeded greens, has reached the point of being ridiculous. If bermudagrass is the "grain culprit" and is overseeded with cool-season grasses such as ryegrass, bentgrass, or *Poa trivialis*, the ball

doesn't even contact the bermudagrass because the bermudagrass lies dormant under the overseeded grasses. The cool-season grasses are not grainy because they are seeded at high rates, grow very upright, and are cut very closely.

A suggestion to help remedy what I believe is a problem is to have commentators meet with golf course superintendents prior to air time. One well-known personality told me he walks the course early in the day to get a feel for what the player will experience. USGA and PGA Tour public relations people should be interested in making sure this time is available for their golf tournaments and championships. The USGA, PGA, and PGA Tour go to great lengths to expend untold resources to insure a top-quality golf course for their events. Superintendents prepare for months prior to the event only to listen to inaccurate remarks from media personnel. Better education is the key. The media need to get together with the USGA and Tour officials and involve the people who really know the most about golf course preparation and turfgrass — the superintendents.

Televised golf has made everyone stop and take notice of golf course conditions.

