

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The top 10 results of a survey of what playing conditions golfers prefer.

by LARRY GILHULY

PSST! Superintendents! Want to start a lively discussion with a group of golfers? Ask this one: "What expectations do you have regarding the playing conditions, maintenance, and overall atmosphere of a golf course (home or away) when you play?" In the time it takes to line up a one-inch putt, the answers will fly.

This same question was asked of a cross section of members of the Pacific Northwest Golf Association and Washington State Golf Association Boards of Directors, volunteers, and other association members that included men and women of varying ages and playing abilities. Some of the answers were predictable, while others describe the difficulties that are faced by those responsible for the maintenance of a golf course. Without further ado, the "Top Ten" answers were as follows:

1. Smooth greens of adequate pace. When John Bodenhamer, Executive Director for the PPGA and WSGA, asked the question, the first and most emphatic answer in most cases was fast greens. Upon further discussion, most of the respondents really wanted smooth greens with decent speed, not fast greens. Not surprisingly, those who still insisted on fast greens were single-digit players.

2. Notice of aeration date. It is not surprising to see this make the list; however, when it appears this high, somebody is not doing a good job of communicating. Whatever it takes, get the message out to your players that aeration will occur on certain dates. The best way to address this situation is to set the aeration dates one year in advance, with tournaments scheduled around these "holey days."

3. An open-minded superintendent. Let's face it. Maintaining the playing field for over 400 people from various walks of life is like walking through a mine field! Emotions frequently become involved from both sides, and simple issues can rapidly lead to *superintendent decline*. Don't fall into this trap! Remove your emotions from the

table and look at questions from players as an opportunity to educate or learn, not as an attempt to tell you how to do your job. Treat every player's questions or concerns with consideration and respect, and the chances are you will get the same in return.

4. Proper course setup. Improper tee marker alignment and hole locations often receive the fastest and most heated response on the day of the occurrence. Creating a *T-square* from one-inch irrigation pipe is a simple and fast method for tee mowers and course setup personnel to eliminate misaligned markers. Proper hole location comes with basic training and a knowledge of the game.

5. Bunkers maintained. Regularly raked and edged bunkers provide hazard definition and eliminate footprints or other irregularities.

6. Firm (dry) conditions. If you have to deal with a poor irrigation system, inconsistent soils, inadequate labor, or any number of other variables, trying to achieve firm conditions without losing turf is extremely difficult. Trying to explain these situations to a player who doesn't care to listen may prove to be one of the most difficult tasks faced by a superintendent. On the other hand, applying too much water does nothing for the game, the grass plant, or the budget. It can expand the superintendent's resume if continued over an extended period of time.

7. Protect the environment. Golfers are asking more questions about how golf courses affect our environment. These players need to be educated by those who maintain their facilities. As a starting point, the results of the USGA Environmental Research study and the benefits golf provides to people and the environment can be found at your regional USGA Green Section office.

8. Level tees. A simple problem that can be corrected only by reconstruction.

9. Green grass. To all of those players who believe this is achievable on a year-

round basis in combination with point number 6, it is time for a reality check! Only golf courses with high budgets, excellent irrigation systems, consistent soils, and weather patterns that seldom change have a chance of achieving this goal. Furthermore, maintaining a totally green golf course increases the use of water, fertilizer, and pesticides. Golfers need to realize that a golf course maintained with firm conditions and some brown areas is far superior in every way to a *sea of green*!

10. Variety in course setup. This is another easy one that can be addressed by establishing a series of hole location charts that assure diversity on a daily and weekly basis.

So, what can we learn from this survey? Three points immediately come to mind, including:

1. There is a glaring lack of education among golfers regarding the environment as it relates to irrigation practices and the need to have a totally green golf course.

2. The expectations for smooth greens of adequate pace, notice of aeration, proper course setup, defined and maintained bunkers, and variety in course setup are all reasonable and should be achievable.

3. Most important, the fact that many golfers in this survey believe superintendents are close-minded points out the need to work on communication skills. Even if a question or comment from a player appears trivial or is based on emotion, the way the superintendent responds will create the perception of open- or close-mindedness. If you are perceived as close-minded, even logical explanations to suggestions or requests may be considered excuses and will hurt your credibility. Remember, an open mind can open many doors, while a mind that is closed can only shut them.

LARRY GILHULY is Director of the Western Region of the USGA Green Section.