

CHOOSING THE BEST APPROACH

Don't bump the "bump and run."

by DAVID A. OATIS

IN MANY WAYS, the game of golf has changed tremendously from its humble beginnings some 400 years ago in Scotland. It began as a game played on naturally windy sites that were maintained more by Mother Nature than by man. However, the game has now been transported around the world, and our ability to irrigate and fertilize, coupled with the demand for green turf and better playing conditions, have undeniably and dramatically altered the style of play.

Perhaps the biggest change is that, in the United States, golf has been turned into an aerial game, and at many courses throughout the country, the "bump and run" shot is but a distant and fading memory that is revisited only during the British Open telecast. Traditionalists and better players still understand the "bump and run" shot and may even play it on occasion, but I submit that most of today's golfers view it with disdain and this is reflected in the maintenance of our golf courses. Golfers or green committee members sometimes exclaim, "We don't want them to run the ball up on the green!" Apparently, playing a *bump and run* shot is considered by some to be as tactless as putting out of a bunker! This notion is ridiculous and has resulted in thousands (perhaps millions) of golfers being cheated out of playing one of the oldest and most interesting shots in golf.

The higher-handicap players often are the most penalized. Too often, the objective in maintaining approaches is to provide healthy, attractive turf and good definition. This results in mowing patterns and maintenance programs

that are based more on aesthetics than their effect on playability. The purpose of this article is to call attention to this important area of our golf courses and to offer suggestions for improving it.

Identifying The Problem

So how does one identify whether a golf hole was designed for the *bump and run* shot? Experience is perhaps the best teacher, but common sense and careful examination of the green, approach, and the bunkering can provide many clues. *Hard green* complaints often result when golfers experience difficulty stopping balls on greens. Although the greens could indeed be firm, this complaint also could be a tipoff that the hole is not playing the way it was intended (e.g., a very long approach shot to a green not designed to accept it).

The solution may actually lie in the architecture of the hole. Thus, the first step is to consider the architecture of the hole and determine what type of approach shot is required. Is it a short, mid, or long iron or fairway wood, and what is the orientation of the landing zone? Remember, it is much more difficult to stop a ball on a green from a downhill lie. If the shot required is a long one from a downhill lie, it may be that a low running shot is called for.

The next consideration is the orientation of the green. Does the green slope toward the landing zone, is it level, or does it slope away from the landing zone? The orientation of the green and the landing zone must be considered *along with the mounding and bunkering* around the green and approach. One of the questions to ask here is which way will the ball bounce

if hit into the approach? Stand in the center of a green and look back toward the landing zone. Oftentimes, you can clearly see whether or not the approach was designed to receive a shot. It is vital to pay more attention to the topography than the existing mowing patterns since mowing patterns can change dramatically over time.

Finally, go out into the approach with a few golf balls. Throwing them into the approach to see precisely which way they bounce is a very instructive technique. With a few throws you can easily determine if the topography of an approach is receptive to this type of shot. You can also identify which areas of an approach produce the best results. Just be careful to consider different angles of play and be sure to disregard the existing mowing pattern.

There are many mistakes that can be made with the management of approaches. Following are a few of the more common ones.

Mowing Patterns

The roughs on either side of the approaches often are encouraged or allowed to grow inward, closing down or *pinching in* the approach. This can hinder or prevent players from running the ball onto the green and can be especially devastating on an old course that may have been designed specifically for that type of shot. Occasionally, rough is grown completely across the approach on a short par-4 or par-5. While this may be appropriate in some cases, it eliminates the *bump and run* shot and it is certainly not appropriate in all cases. If the objective is to increase difficulty, narrowing or elimi-



An impossible shot! A firm green that slopes away from the golfer and rough grown across the approach will cause problems for all but the very best of golfers.

nating approaches may not be the way to do it. This just singles out and penalizes shorter hitters and higher handicappers.

Mowing patterns are best changed in the fall or early spring in most climates, and this may be all that is required to correct the situation. However, regrassing is necessary for courses where different varieties are being grown in fairways and roughs. This will be discussed later under "Turfgrass Varieties."

Resiliency

Another common problem with approaches is that they are soft and thatchy. The phenomenon of light-weight mowing started more than 20 years ago when superintendents began mowing approaches with triplex putting-green mowers to eliminate the damage that occurred when large fairway mowers made their turns. Since then, the approaches at many courses have received more gentle treatment. This situation can lead to increased

thatch buildup, which leaves approaches soft and unreceptive to the *bump and run* shot. Firm, properly defined approaches are essential for some holes to play fairly. For instance, a par-4 with a firm green that requires a long second shot should not have a soft, spongy approach or rough grown all the way across it. A ball hit into a soft approach is unlikely to bounce onto the green, and if the green is too firm to receive a shot, the player is left without a reasonable opportunity of getting his approach shot onto the green.

The solution for most thatch problems is to increase the intensity of the cultivation program. In the Northeast, aerification with large, hollow tines a couple of times annually, combined with one or two aggressive and several light verticuttings, usually is recommended. It may be necessary to employ this type of program for a few years to get severe thatch problems under control. Approaches also can be aerified

and topdressed just as greens are; this is an option to consider if cultivation alone proves insufficient.

Irrigation

Irrigation of approaches is sometimes an afterthought, and inaccurate irrigation often results when older systems are modified or updated. Most older systems in the Northeast were designed to supplement rainfall, while many of today's new systems are designed to meet turfgrass water requirements even in an extended drought. The key with irrigation is to make sure that sprinkler coverage and control are adequate. There are many possible causes of poor coverage in the approaches, but having incompatible sprinkler heads or nozzles on fairways and greens is a common problem. Similar problems result if sprinkler spacing is incorrect. Poor coverage can create drought stress and localized dry spots in one area, and unhealthy, disease-prone turf and soft surfaces in

adjacent areas. Neither type plays well. In some cases, sprinklers designed to provide coverage for the approaches overlap onto the putting greens, and this situation creates even more problems.

Careful analysis of irrigation coverage is the first step in developing a solution. In most situations, individual head control is strongly recommended for greens and approaches so that the water requirements of the turfgrass can be met more accurately.

Unnecessary Obstacles

How many times have you seen unsightly valve boxes or sunken sprinkler heads right in the middle of an approach in front of a green? It isn't always possible, but try to avoid locating valve boxes or drainage grates in approaches where they might affect play. Soil settlement after irrigation or drainage work sometimes results in unsightly depressions that also can impact play. These areas should be leveled, as should any sprinkler heads that are located in approaches. The objective is to reduce their chances of affecting play.

Turfgrass Varieties

Approaches may be comprised of a mixture of different grasses, often a result of turf loss, grass conversion

programs, or changes in mowing patterns. A mixture of bentgrass and annual bluegrass is the norm for fairways in the Northeast, but ryegrass also may be used in fairways and/or roughs. The darker color and different growth habit of the ryegrass can create a clumpy and mottled appearance if it is not present in sufficient quantity. This can be unattractive and can affect play.

Developing a better playing, consistent, and more reliable stand of turf in approaches is much the same as it would be for any other area of the golf course. Aerification, verticutting, and overseeding combined with proper fertility and water management generally are the keys to success. Sodding is always an option if the problems are severe enough and the desire to correct them is strong. Just remember that there are drawbacks to sodding, and the quickest solution isn't always the best. It is essential to use good quality sod. Sod with weeds, excessive thatch, or sod grown on an incompatible soil should be avoided. Choosing sod that is comprised of the same turfgrass varieties that exist in the fairways will help the new work blend better from an aesthetic standpoint. Proper timing of the work is important and will vary based on the climatic region and the turfgrass species being used.

Traffic Patterns

Reducing traffic on approaches often is a key component in an approach improvement program, and you might be surprised by just how much traffic your approaches actually receive. Putting green mowers turn in the collar/approach area, approach mowers mow and make turns in them, and fairway mowers mow into and make turns on the approaches. Extremely narrow approaches may have even more problems with mower traffic. Throw in a little golfer traffic and it's no wonder that the turf sometimes suffers. Traffic and mowing patterns must be considered carefully and shifted regularly.

Conclusion

Taking the *bump and run* shot away from the golfer by pinching in the approaches or allowing them to become soft and spongy can unfairly penalize the golfer and detract from the design of a hole. Unfortunately, it seems that irrigation systems, the L-wedge, and televised golf have erased the *bump and run* shot from the repertoire of most golfers, and that truly is a shame. The low running shot has been a wonderful part of the game since its inception. It requires great skill and calculation, plus it is fun to play. More importantly, many courses, especially

some of the older ones, demand that it occasionally be played. If you have questions about how your approaches should play, consult your Green Section agronomist during your next Turf Advisory Service visit or discuss your concerns with a competent golf course architect. Proper maintenance of approaches can put a wonderful shot back in your golf bag and add to the enjoyment and variety of how a golf hole plays.

Sometimes the bunkering does not provide much room for an approach.



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