

TOO MUCH CONSISTENCY?

Evaluating our turf conditioning priorities.

by JIM SKORULSKI

MORE AND MORE often we hear complaints about inconsistent playing conditions. Some comments may be valid, but more often than not the complaint is unjustified or unrealistic. What causes golfers to place more and more emphasis on consistency? Is it a general increase in expectations? Are priorities shifting as our turf conditioning programs improve? Perhaps it is a by-product of television or an arrogance created by large operating budgets that instill a confidence that anything can be controlled. There is probably no single answer. The bottom line seems to be that the game and golfers are evolving, and with the evolution come increasing demands that the golf course play consistently from hole to hole and day to day.

You may ask what is wrong with that goal. Nothing is wrong with the goal itself. However, the golfer, the turf manager, and even this agronomist must be reminded from time to time that we are working with a natural system that is and always will be dynamic. After all, that is what makes golf the game it is. It provides a test of our skill and our abilities to adjust to varying conditions in the field. The better golfer will be the player who has the skill level, can recognize the varying conditions, and can adjust to those conditions.

Our management capabilities have improved significantly and we can now better manage golf courses with sophisticated equipment, new technology, larger staffs, more effective and safer pesticides, and ready access to information. Yes, we can make the golf course play relatively consistently from hole to hole on a given day. But keeping the golf course in a consistent condition, season long, is another thing altogether. And then we have to ask ourselves, do we really want to make the golf course that consistent? After all, it's the variability that keeps golf, well, golf.

How much money are we willing to spend to obtain the consistency? Take, for example, green speed. It is impor-

tant that the greens roll at relatively the same speed. The Stimpmeter is a helpful tool to determine and maintain that consistency. But can golfers actually perceive small differences in green speed? Do all greens have to be maintained in an artificially soft condition so as to accept shots even from poor players? Shouldn't a golfer have some responsibility to read the green, or through playing experience determine if a particular green may be slightly faster, slower, or harder than the other greens? Reading the green is as much a part of the game as making the stroke itself. Sure, we should develop our programs to make the greens as consistent as possible, but at the same time realize that the greens are going to vary depending on weather conditions, the time of the season, and the growing environment in which the green is located. Trying to eliminate these inconsistencies altogether is probably not possible and will add significant costs to our already high operating budgets.

Another often-heard complaint is that the sand in the bunkers is not consistent or that it is too hard or too soft. Excessively soft sand is not desirable, and steps should be taken to eliminate that condition. However, isn't it becoming a bit foolish when we have to irrigate the sand daily to maintain a certain level of firmness from bunker to bunker? I have little sympathy for golfers who whine about inconsistent playing conditions in a hazard. After all, it is a hazard and, more and more, that fact is being overlooked. A golfer should be able to identify the sand's playability by its feel and adjust the shot to those conditions. Yes, it is a good idea to make the sands favorable and consistent from bunker to bunker, but in the meantime learn to play the necessary shots, and focus attention on more important maintenance priorities.

The final example that is equally troubling is the demand to set the tee markers at or very near the permanent distance marker from which the course is rated. The idea is that the course should play consistently from the

same yardage for handicap purposes. Demands such as this are disastrous for the turf and in time make for a pretty boring round of golf. There is no reason why the markers should not be moved widely over the teeing surface to distribute traffic and create some variety from day to day. Yardage lost on one hole can be made up on another. Spend more time concentrating on the shot and not your handicap.

The same complaints can be heard concerning consistent lies in the fairways and, yes, even roughs. Where does it end? Will it end? I certainly hope it does. It would be a shame if we removed the variability from the game. It would take away something that makes golf and the art of maintaining golf courses special and different from other games and professions. It would also make golf a lot less affordable. Fortunately, as long as golf is played on grass and in the outdoors, we will always have some variability to contend with. Let's begin to look at the variability not as a bad thing but as part of the game — local knowledge, if you will. It is the variability of the playing field that separates golf from other games.

A marvelous and true story printed in the May 1998 issue of *Greenkeeper International* sums it up nicely. Mr. Shaig Logan, a past Greenkeeper at Muirfield, was presented with a Stimpmeter prior to The Open being held at the course. "What's this for?" he asked. It's for measuring the speed of the greens, he was told. "Why would I want to do that?" So that you can make each green roll at the same speed. "Why would I want to do that?" So the 1st green would not be slower than the 9th, and the 10th would be equal to the 17th and 18th, not slower, not faster. "But laddie," he said, "that's why we have practice rounds."

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