

CONSISTENT PERFECTION

Golf course management in an “everything now” society.

by BOB BRAME

I WISH I HAD a nickel for every time I’ve heard someone say, “We just want it to play the same every day.” Usually this comes from a course official with authentic sincerity beaming through an energetic smile. Sometimes I respond tactfully, but sometimes more bluntly, like: “. . . and the people in hell want ice water.” The bottom line is, we don’t always get what we want, especially when dealing with Mother Nature. Isn’t the ebb and flow of course playability, as a result of weather conditions, the essence of golf? Isn’t the premise of the game to play the course the way you find it and play your ball where it lies? Many would nod yes, and yet turn and reiterate their desire for the same playability day after day.

We live in a society where business is conducted in seconds and minutes, rather than days, weeks, and years. Faxes and e-mail create immediate information flow. This has undoubtedly helped fuel the desire for immediate and perfect conditioning of golf courses. The attitude seems to be that, surely, in such a high-tech world something can be done to correct any problem or improve any situation. No doubt about it, something *can* be done, but it takes time. We are playing the game of golf on Mother Nature’s home court and the only thing that happens fast is crop failure. While today’s superintendent has more tools to work with, it is still a living, dynamic surface.

The primary purpose of the Stimp-meter® is to allow a superintendent to monitor the consistency of ball roll speed from green to green on a given day. Where the game originated in Scotland, a few have argued about the need for consistency on a given day, but it has become the *focus* of American golf. In fact, we not only want them all the same each day, but we want it to roll the same day after day. This leaves the superintendent trying to counter high temperatures, high humidity, rainfall (too much or too little), or frost, to provide the same speed all the time. Then, when some turf weakening or loss occurs, the quick retort is, “We didn’t want you to



Mother Nature rules, so relax and enjoy the game. The golf course is never going to play the same every day, and playing the ball as it lies is the basic premise of the game.

kill them; we just wanted them fast.” Hello.

How about bunkers? Here again, it is common to hear, “Our bunkers aren’t consistent” or “There is too much (or too little) sand.” They’re hazards! Where did we get the idea that hazards should all play the same? At many courses, bunkers are the most expensive footage being maintained. In fact, it is not uncommon to see bunkers being hand raked daily and the greens mowed with triplex units. What’s wrong with that prioritization of funds? Why not shift to the use of walk-behind mowers on greens and then rake bunkers once or twice a week, touching up footprints from the previous day’s disturbance on the off days.

Poa annua control is also tied to the “consistent perfection” syndrome. Everyone (golfers, committee members, owners, officials, and superintendents) continues to look for the silver bullet. We want it out of here and we want it done yesterday. But don’t raise the mowing height or dry the surfaces — keep ‘em fast and make sure they hold! Recognizing that moisture in any form will slow green speed, it’s kind of tough to offer fast pace and surfaces that will hold a sculled nine iron. Dry is the target for both healthy

turf and good playability. If this means your shot doesn’t hold the green, play a different shot. Yet, ultimately it is Mother Nature who will determine what the pursuit of dry actually produces.

The harsh weather of 1995 and the drought of 1999 are examples that clearly illustrate Mother Nature’s ultimate control of golf course playability. You’d think we’d learn to work with her and not try to fight the inevitable. Ultimately, an agronomically solid foundation and the realization that golf turf conditioning will vary depending upon weather conditions are the key components in avoiding the “consistent perfection” syndrome/trap. Cut the superintendent some slack, unless of course you have a direct line on tomorrow’s weather. When we figure out how to e-mail or fax Mother Nature, then perhaps we can zero in on “consistent perfection.” In the meantime, relax and enjoy the game. In reality, neither consistent perfection nor perfect consistency are realistic.

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