

“MAKING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING GOLFERS”

Golfers' expectations are shaped by someone; why shouldn't it be you?

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

Surveys conducted by the USGA Green Section staff over the years consistently show that communication is the number-one problem facing golf course superintendents. Nowhere is this “problem” more prevalent than in the area of expectations for the playing condition and appearance of the golf course. A wide gap often exists between what the golfer expects and what the turf management staff is able to achieve, given the existing resources and site conditions.

Expectations are not inherently a bad thing. Golfers do not dream expectations, but they are influenced by inputs such as television, friends, reviews of other courses, their own experiences, and so forth. Unfortunately, turf managers and course officials sometimes are put in a defensive or reactionary role when trying to meet or manage golfer expectations.

The goal of this article is to help course officials become a stronger influence on golfer expectations and, in doing so, bridge the gap between what golfers expect and what is being produced. Before players can be influenced, course officials must understand both the product they have and the product they want. To accomplish this goal, key areas of the golf course will be identified for staff and course officials to evaluate. A hypothetical example will show how to evaluate current course conditions and the resources that are available to help with this evaluation. Finally, several methods will be offered to share this information with the golfers and influence their expectations.

STEP 1: DETERMINING WHAT TO EVALUATE

If course officials and staff are on a mission to influence golfers and make friends, a plan is needed. What areas or aspects of the golf course should be most closely scrutinized and what areas



Proper course marking is essential to playing according to The Rules of Golf. Stakes are used to identify a hazard to the golfer while painted lines define the margin of a hazard.

are less important? This author proposes that emphasis should be placed on evaluating how the course plays, not so much how it looks. Too much focus on course presentation can send costs through the roof, and it does not buy long-lasting golfer satisfaction. If satisfaction increased with beauty, the clubs with the largest budgets would have the fewest complaints. This is not happening in the real world today.

Below is a list of areas that can be evaluated. This is not an exhaustive list and every golf course should focus on what it considers to be most important.

- Ability to play by the Rules of Golf.
- Architectural integrity of the golf course.
- Course setup.
- Tees.
- Fairways and rough.
- Putting greens.
- Bunkers.

STEP 2: CONDUCTING THE EVALUATION

The hypothetical example that follows shows how the course officials and staff of our imaginary course, Rolling Green Country Club in Birmingham, Alabama, evaluated the golf course and developed reasonable expectations for these areas. The resources they used to conduct their evaluation are included, too. At the end of each example are “payoffs” or benefits the club will receive from doing this work.

PLAY BY THE RULES

Rolling Green Evaluation: The membership at Rolling Green C.C. believes the Rules of Golf are part of the spirit of the game and help form the basis for years of enjoyment. We hope the golfers at our course expect the course to be prepared in such a way that they can play according to the Rules of Golf. We discovered that most of the year, the lateral hazards and water hazards on our course were not completely marked. A defined boundary or margin is necessary when taking relief from a lateral or water hazard under the Rules of Golf.

We contacted our state golf association to assist us in getting the course accurately marked. We decided to use a combination of stakes and paint when marking water hazards and lateral hazards. The stakes identify the presence of a hazard to the golfer, while the painted line defines the

margin of the hazard. Red paint and red stakes are used to mark lateral hazards, and yellow stakes and yellow paint to mark water hazards. Once the course was marked correctly and completely, the job of keeping the course marked all the time was assigned to one of our employees.

Resources Used: State golf association.

Payoff: The golf facility that takes the effort to keep the course marked at all times will reap several rewards. First, golfers will see that those in charge of marking the course have a thorough understanding of the game and a respect for playing the game according to the Rules of Golf. Additionally, preparation for outings and tournament play will be much easier.

ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY

Rolling Green Evaluation: Mr. I. M. Grate, the architect who designed Rolling Green C.C. in the 1950s is no longer with us, unfortunately. Nonetheless, we acknowledge he had certain intentions in mind when designing each of the holes. As course officials and staff, we have an interest in maintaining the integrity of our architect's design. We are mindful of the fact that the integrity of many holes has changed due to tree plantings, tree growth, and bunker additions over the years. We believe Mr. Grate created a challenging, unique course and that our members have every right to expect the opportunity to play the course as the architect intended.

Although some of the officials on our Green Committee have an affinity for golf course design, no one at the club was qualified to make recommendations necessary to restore the original intent of the architect. As a result, we hired Mr. James Green, an architect familiar with the designs of Mr. I. M. Grate, to guide us as we look to keep our course true to the intentions of the founding architect and relevant to today's game. Mr. Green toured our golf course and his expertise is benefitting us already. We posted Mr. Green's report on our Web site and golfers are able to learn more about the golf course. For example, we learned that the eighth hole was designed as a cape hole. This type of golf hole was meant to offer players the chance to try a risky shot over the lake in the corner of the dogleg with the reward of being much closer to the putting green. The two trees planted in the corner of the dogleg back in 1978 actually eliminate this option and steer all players away from the water.

Resources Used: A qualified golf course architect.

Payoff: By reporting this information to those who play the course, the officials and staff at Rolling Green are reinforcing how the golf course was intended to be played. Sharing this knowledge will inspire confidence among golfers that future changes or a lack of changes are based upon knowledge of the designer and not based upon personal agendas.

COURSE SETUP

Rolling Green Evaluation: Our course was rated four years ago by our state golf association. We understand that course setup determines the way each hole plays on a given day. The tee marker position and the hole location influence the length and relative difficulty of a hole. Our course setup crew understands the importance of maintaining the integrity of our course rating. In other words, we try to keep the course playing approximately the same length every day and provide a good balance of easy, moderate, and difficult hole locations.

Resources Available: State golf association.

Payoff: A good course setup policy demonstrates that course officials and the superintendent are serious about the way the game is played on the course. Further, criticism that the person setting up the holes on a given day had a long night or that certain hole locations are unfair can be dismissed with a minimum of effort. Finally, the use of available tee and green space will be maximized.

TEES

Rolling Green Evaluation: At Rolling Green, the teeing ground on each hole is used at least once by every golfer in a round. The quality of the tees is impacted by many factors, including the growing environment, soil type, turfgrass type, uniformity of the base, sunlight levels, tree limb interference, and size in relation to the number of rounds played. This helped our officials understand how the quality of tees can vary widely within our course.

We evaluated all our tees on the golf course for adequate size, surface uniformity, and shade. We used a formula introduced in a *Green Section Record* article called "Tailor Made" to determine if our tees and practice tee were large enough based upon our level of play (Vermeulen, 2002). The formula took into account rounds played, divot recovery time, and turfgrass type. Of the 62 tees on the golf course, we discovered serious shade

problems on two tees, inadequate size on three others, and an uneven surface on two more. All the other tees met our expectation of excellent surface uniformity and healthy turf.

Resources Used: *Green Section Record* article called "Tailor Made" and a USGA Green Section Turf Advisory Service visit.



Payoff: The evaluation of the tees confirmed that the vast majority of tees are meeting expectations. The weakest tees are caused by lack of size and shade, which the superintendent has been reporting for years. It wasn't until all the committee members conducted the evaluation that they understood the facts of the shade problems.

A constructive review of the tee conditions and subsequent communication to the golfers sent several messages. First, the overwhelming majority of tees meet the expectations of a level surface and strong turf every day. By acknowledging the weak areas and their causes proactively, complaints about the tees should decrease and the club is in a much stronger position to respond to complaints that do occur. This will be enhanced if they outline a program to improve the tees over some period of time.

FAIRWAYS

Rolling Green Evaluation: Fairway conditions have been a contentious issue at Rolling Green for years. One of the biggest areas of controversy is the fairway mowing height. Some players prefer taller fairways, but others favor shorter turf in the fairways. Still others seem concerned about color and perceive a lush, green surface as an ideal fairway condition.

We learned about the "Report Card for Fairways" developed by Patrick Gross of the USGA

Course officials and golf course staff who make the effort to evaluate their course and develop expectations are well on their way to solving golf maintenance's number-one problem, communication.



Putting greens receive the most scrutiny from golfers. Determining sustainable daily green speed involves taking into account the health of the turf, available resources, environmental conditions, and golf course design.

and described in an issue of the *Green Section Record* (Gross, 2000). The article explained that fairway conditioning involves several factors, including density, firmness, resiliency, turf selection, mowing and grooming practices, drainage, water management, and pest management. At the end of our evaluation, we realized that the fairways at Rolling Green did not have any serious deficiencies and that we needed to reach a consensus on mowing height and watering practices.

The first step in resolving these issues was deciding upon the definition of a good fairway. We agreed that a good fairway is one where the ball can be played down during the season, weeds are kept to a minimum, and the golfer is afforded the chance to play as many types of shots as possible (i.e., lowing running shots, high shots, etc.). Our golf professional and superintendent advised that a mowing height of $\frac{1}{2}$ inch was a fair compromise for players of all abilities and that the irrigation schedule should be based on keeping the turf healthy and not used as a means to produce optimum color.

Resources Used: “How Fair Are Your Fairways?” *Green Section Record* article.

Payoff: The Green Committee’s evaluation is going to influence the golfers. First, they reached a consensus and articulated what they expect for fairway conditions. In doing so, they advised the

golfers that the major emphasis is placed on how the fairways play, not how they look.

PUTTING GREENS

The putting greens are the most important part of our course since they involve, on average, two out of every three shots in a round of golf and they generate most of the comments made by golfers. Although green speeds have increased dramatically since the mid-1970s when our superintendent arrived, there is pressure to make them faster each year. Could higher speeds be attained without sacrificing the health of the turf? Would our greens need to be rebuilt? Should our greens be rebuilt? All are excellent questions, but the Committee had no answers.

Our superintendent and regional USGA Green Section agronomist shared several resources with us to assist in our evaluation. The first was an article called “S.P.E.E.D. — Consider What’s Right for Your Course” that appeared in the *Green Section Record* (Vermeulen, 1995). The article showed us how to determine a daily expected green speed that took into account the health of the turf, resources available, environmental conditions, the expertise level of our golfers, and course design.

Once we had a handle on an attainable green speed for daily play, we turned to the article “Helping Your Greens Make the Grade” (Moore, 1998). This article used a report card format to grade many of the factors that influence putting green performance. The evaluation was simple to do with the help of our superintendent, and everyone enjoyed participating. At the completion of our report-card analysis, we learned that our rootzone and turfgrass were still performing well. Problem areas were due mainly to restricted growing environments with poor air movement and shade. Improving the grades on those greens is possible without the expense and disruption of reconstruction.

We concluded that it is reasonable for our golfers to expect putting greens that feature a level of smoothness and speed that provide a good challenge, do not slow play unduly, are not disrupted by weed or other pest problems, and can be attained under our existing budget and staff levels.

Resources Used: “S.P.E.E.D. — Consider What’s Right for Your Course” article, “Helping Your Greens Make the Grade” article, and a USGA Green Section agronomist.



It is never too early to begin communicating about expectations of golf course conditions. Beginning golfers should be instructed about bunkers being hazards and that putting green smoothness is more important than speed. Will they believe it? There is only one way to find out.

Payoff: The Green Committee at Rolling Hills has taken the time to create a sustainable program with green speeds that provide a good balance between the agronomic needs of the turf and the expectations of the golfers. This places the Green Committee and staff in a position of strength to answer questions about green speed. It now will be possible to provide a thoughtful answer to the golfer who has just putted miserably one Saturday morning and has cornered a Green Committee member or staff member with some variation of the question/demand/comment, “Why are the greens so slow?”

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

The desire to become a greater influence on golfers has required a considerable effort on the part of the Green Committee and the staff at Rolling Hills. However, to be a unified and strong influence on the golfers, those in leadership positions at the club must understand the product the club desires to produce and what is being produced. This does take some effort, but doing so will contribute to the ultimate goal of influencing golfers. There are no shortcuts when it comes to evaluating your own course and determining reasonable expectations.

The information generated by our Rolling Green example is powerful. There are at least six conclusions that will influence golfers.

- The Rules of Golf govern play and the course is maintained and marked accordingly at all times.

- The membership cherishes the work of the original architect, and the club is committed to maintaining the integrity of his work.
- The course is set up daily to provide a challenge that is consistent with the course/slope rating.
- A level surface and strong turf are expected on the tees.
- The expectation for the fairways is to provide a firm, dry surface when weather permits and to keep the mowing height at a level satisfactory for the skills of most of the golfers.
- The expectation for the putting greens is to maintain a level of smoothness and speed that provides a good challenge, does not slow play unduly, is not compromised by weed or other pest problems, and can be attained under our existing budget and staff levels.

The true rewards at Rolling Green will come over time when this information is disseminated, relayed, promoted, discussed, and reviewed over and over with the golfers. This is a job that will never end because there will always be other factors shaping golfer expectations.

Although there are countless ways to share information with golfers, several of the more popular methods will be mentioned here. The first is a monthly e-mail update from the golf course superintendent. Although many will object that e-mail newsletters take too much time in an already overburdened schedule, the fact remains that once a superintendent spends a couple of hours creating a newsletter, it can be

e-mailed to one or 100 people with one click of the mouse and at the same cost. The e-mail update can be as simple or as elaborate as time allows. The superintendent at Rolling Hills could use one of the conclusions mentioned above for a lead story for each of the next six months.

The Web site for the golf course is another great way to inexpensively share information with the golfers. A page for course expectations could be created. In our Rolling Hills example, the details of the course evaluation could be written up and the expectations stated. This can be done for minimal cost, but the golfer will be exposed to this information over and over on the Web site. Ask yourself these questions: Would prospective members rather know what the expectations for course conditions are, or would they rather not know? Would existing members rather know that the Green Committee has developed course expectations and evaluated course conditions, or not?

Another simple, inexpensive, and effective way to influence golfers is to make sure the staff and Green Committee are armed with the same evaluation and expectation information so that questions will be answered consistently. It is such a simple concept, but it cannot be implemented until the club knows what it wants to produce.

Shade is one factor that should be considered when evaluating tees, as it has a major effect on turf quality.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps this article has sparked a few ideas and will serve as a starting point for golf courses interested in bridging the gap between golf expectations and current conditions. Despite economic challenges over the past few years, turf-grass conditions across the board are at an all-time high. For courses that take the time to understand what they have and agree upon what they want, they can make friends and influence golfers. For those who do not make the effort, communication will continue to be the number-one problem.

REFERENCES

- Gross, Patrick J. 2000. How fair are your fairways?: A report card for evaluating fairway quality. *USGA Green Section Record*. 38(2):1-5.
- Moore, James Frances. 1998. Helping your greens make the grade: Here's a guide to help you evaluate the many factors that determine how your greens perform. *USGA Green Section Record*. 36(2):1-7.
- Vermeulen, Paul. 2002. Tailor made: New equations to determine proper tee size. *USGA Green Section Record*. 40(2):1-6.
- Vermeulen, Paul. 1995. S.P.E.E.D. — Consider what's right for your course. *USGA Green Section Record*. 33(6):1-5.

CHRIS HARTWIGER is a Green Section agronomist who has been making friends in the Southeast Region since 1995.

