

Becoming Bilingual

Use your Green Section Decoder to understand the language of golfers.

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

Golfers, present company included, are an interesting lot. They will play in the rain and hunt for golf balls in snake-infested streams, and they are masters at pointing out the obvious. Is it really necessary for golfers to say that the bunkers are inconsistent every time they tee it up? In my travels as a USGA agronomist, I have learned that golfers also speak a different language. This language sounds much like English, but the words and phrases have a much different meaning. However, with a little luck, a good set of ears, and help from the “Green Section Decoder,” you too can be on your way to becoming bilingual.

After nearly ten years traveling throughout the Southeast and conducting hundreds of Turfgrass Advisory Visits, I thought I had heard them all. But every year there is another one to add to the list. Like many of you, my eyes have glazed over, my brain has become foggy, and I’ve been reduced to scratching my head more than once over the gems shared with me by well-meaning and very concerned golfers. Below are a few of my favorites and what they really mean.

- “There’s no grass on the fairways.”

Origin: The senior men’s group.

Translation: I’m having trouble getting my 11 wood in the air.

- “We want to take this course to the next level.”

Origin: Any members who watch golf on television or who have just played a course with a budget at least twice as big as their own.

Translation: I know our course can be better and I’m not sure how, but repeating this phrase over and over is gratifying.

- “Did you mow the greens today?”

Origin: Ex-Green Committee members who know something about turf maintenance.

Translation: I’ve just finished my warm-up on the practice putting green and I cannot get the ball anywhere close to the hole. It can’t be me, because if it is, I’m going to have my wallet cleaned out by my buddies today. The maintenance staff must be at fault, and not mowing the greens is the only thing I can think of.

- “The greens are too fast” or “the greens are too slow.”

Origin: Golfers who have changed putters more times than they have changed socks.

Translation: These statements basically say the same thing: I putted poorly today. The green speed is wrong. If the greens were the speed I wanted, I would have putted better.

- “The bunkers are inconsistent.”

Origin: Most golfers. This is one of the biggest complaints heard today.

Translation: I don’t get up and down as often as I think I should. I should be able to get up and down just like the professionals on TV despite never practicing and using equipment that hasn’t been properly fitted for me.

Author’s Input: Today’s golfer does not realize bunkers have never been consistent, they are not consistent today, and they will never be consistent.

- “The rough is too long.”

Origin: Players of all shapes and sizes who insist on hitting their driver on every tee shot because it is the club that flies the longest.

Translation: I’m having trouble hitting the dreaded enigmatic straight shot.

- “The course is perfect.”

Origin: Happy golfers.

Translation: I just shot my career round.

Author’s Input: There is nothing that brings a course to perfection faster than a career round.

- “The course is perfect, but . . .”

Origin: Any course official.

Translation: This is a tricky one and looks surprisingly similar to “the course is perfect” phrase, except it is followed by the infamous “but . . .” Upon hearing this phrase, a superintendent is advised to head to the nearest word processor and begin polishing up the resume because the end is near.

The language of golfers can be puzzling. While the Green Section Decoder is a fun look at the challenges that golf course maintenance and the golfers bring to a superintendent, there are a few important points to be made. All too often superintendents and course officials fail to completely diagnose problems on the golf course.

Taking criticism or comments at face value sometimes causes us all to miss the real problem and in the process implement solutions that are not going to work. Raising mowing heights so that the critics believe there is now grass on the fairways may silence them, but is there another group at the club that will resent the changes? Will rebuilding the bunkers and shipping bunker sand halfway across the country really make the bunkers more consistent? Every solution to a real or perceived problem is going to involve people in addition to agronomy. Take the time to learn the language of golfers and you will not only become bilingual, but your career will prosper.

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