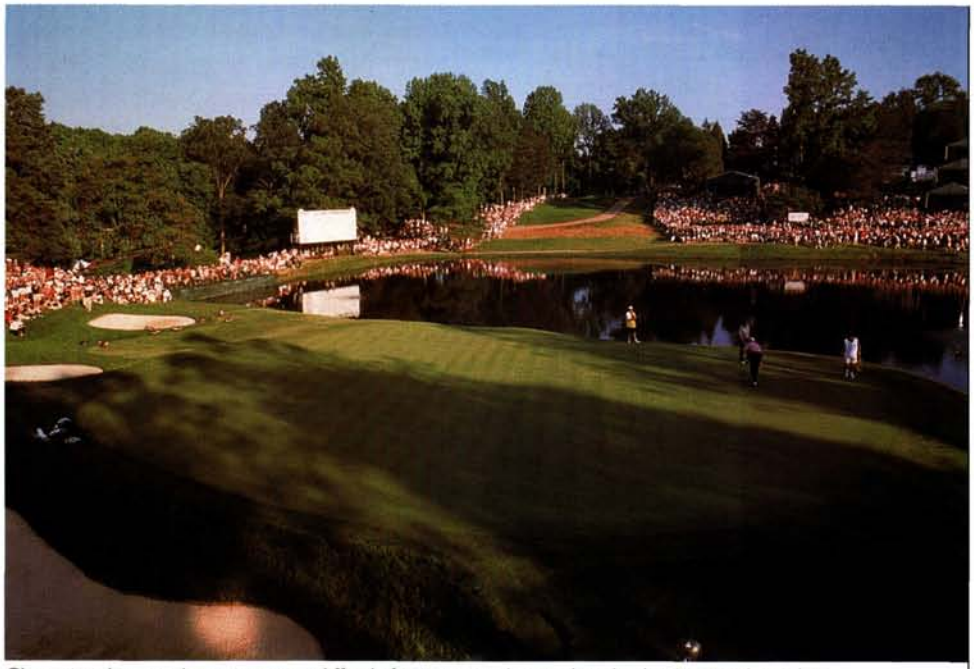
Where is Green Speed Taking the Game?

Are ultra-fast putting greens threatening to ruin the game we love?

BY MATT NELSON AND LARRY GILHULY



Championship conditions are too difficult for average, day-to-day play, leading to slow play and frustrated golfers.

A search for *green speed* in the Turfgrass Information File (TGIF) database at Michigan State University produces a count of 543 articles. A search of the *Green Section Record* reveals that green speed has been discussed in 75 articles since the 1920s. In both instances, more than 97% of these articles have been published since 1977, the year the Stimpmeter® was introduced. As a frequently discussed issue, speed is a relatively new phenomenon in golf's long and rich history.

A majority of the articles in turfgrass publications report on the short- and long-term consequences of turfgrass health when pursuing fast greens for an extended time period. It is well documented that low mowing, frequent grooming, and excessive rolling of putting surfaces can increase physiological stress in the turf, increase disease activity, promote weed invasion, and generally diminish the reliability of the turfgrass stand. When it comes to green committees, course officials, owners, and many golfers, these arguments concerning turf quality and sustainability often fall on deaf ears. Unrealistic comparisons between golf courses are commonly made, and it becomes the burden of the golf course superintendent to meet expectations, realistic or not.

The turfgrass industry itself has contributed greatly to the green speed debate. While on one hand agronomic problems relating to turfgrass performance and reliability are often pinned on the pursuit of increased ball roll, better mowers, improved plant protectant compounds, safer plant growth regulators, refined cultivation techniques, more sophisticated irrigation, increased superintendent training, and the advent of the information age have all enabled turgrass managers to achieve faster greens more safely. If you want your putting greens to roll 13 feet as measured by the Stimpmeter — we have the technology. Do you have the cash and the conviction to commit to the necessary programs? All of them?

The point of this article is not to debate the agronomic reality of maintaining consistently fast greens in any particular climate or location, but rather to draw attention to the playability concerns that arise from excessively fast greens. The authors have found that golfers are likely to accept playability issues as a reason to limit green speed, especially if a broad spectrum of the membership or clientele is apprised of the problems that fast greens can cause.

During the past 25 years or so since the advent of the Stimpmeter, green speeds have increased by about three to four feet at golf courses in the Pacific Northwest and intermountain regions of the U.S. This represents about a 50% increase in ball roll in this time period. These statistics are based on green speed readings taken during USGA Turfgrass Advisory Service visits from the late 1970s through the present. These numbers are real, not fictitious, despite the most keen memories of any longtime player. In fact, regular membership green speeds at many golf courses today exceed national championship green speeds of only 10 or 20 years ago. Interestingly, the average handicap of the American golfer is 16.1 for men and 29.2 for women.

Left: Smoother putting green surfaces should be the goal — not speed! Right: Many older golf greens were constructed with slopes too steep for the ultra-fast green speeds of today. In some cases, reconstruction is warranted, but slowing down the greens some is a lot less expensive and disruptive, and preserves the character and design integrity of the golf hole.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FAST GREENS?

They slow down play! If any golfer goes through the same pre-shot routine with each putt, consider that it naturally takes longer to hit four putts than three. Fast greens make it increasingly difficult to stop a golf ball close to the hole, especially on longer putts and when contours are presented. Arguably, it is even more difficult to play delicate pitch shots from around greens and stop the ball near the hole (or even on the green), leading to slower play.

Slow play is regularly cited as a primary deterrent to golfer participation and is a major industry concern. Green speed doesn't have to be rolled back to the days when a putter required a little loft, but some measure of control will increase enjoyment for the majority of players while keeping them moving along.

Interesting hole locations are lost. As greens become faster, certain portions of putting greens are no longer acceptable for a fair hole location. No one likes to see a missed putt roll back or a well-struck putt roll completely off a green when missing the hole. Even subtle contours can become unacceptable when green speeds are too fast, and this compromises the original strategy and design intent of many great golf greens and also results in limited setup possibilities. Some wonderful old golf greens now have only two or three good hole locations because of the demand for excessive green speed. Setup becomes stale, and much of the fun and excitement of the golf course is lost.

Another worrisome trend at present is the reconstruction of many challenging and interesting older golf greens to accommodate modern green speeds. In some cases such renovation is completely valid and supported, but at least as many more would be better served by moderating speed and enjoying the dynamics of the design. New putting green design is limited as compared to older golf courses with surface contours and corresponding approach shot value and variability.

Ball marks and old holes are slower to heal. With less grass on greens to cushion the blow from incoming shots and less leaf area to fix energy for recovery, it is no wonder ball marks are a problem of epidemic proportion at busy facilities. Golfers can appreciate problems with ball marks when they contribute to missing an easy five-footer, and even those ball marks that are properly repaired are slow to heal because of the aforementioned limitations in turfgrass canopy.

A much tighter margin of error with plug replacement of old holes results from closer and closer mowing. Mechanical injury to the grass in the summer months usually requires several weeks or more to heal, and if a green has become limited to only two or three areas for hole locations, these concentrated plugs become an eyesore, and putting quality is compromised.

Golf course setup is for a minority of players. The setup of golf courses with very fast greens caters to the minority of golfers who are the best players. As mentioned above, chip shots and longer putts are almost impossible for the average player, thereby diminishing the fun factor and slowing the pace of play. Golf is an extremely difficult game for the overwhelming majority of players and does not need to be even more frustrating.

Fast greens put the emphasis on "championship" rather than "fun." Increasing fun and decreasing frustration would seem to be a logical approach to growing the game of golf. So many golf courses today are striving to provide so-called "championship" conditions on the putting greens every day, rather than considering fun and enjoyable golf for all players. Better drivers, irons, and golf balls are all marketed to make it easier to hit it like the pros and with greater replication. Even if it does not improve scoring, most golfers like to hit the ball a little better. The same argument can be made for putting green conditioning — most golfers want to see the ball go in the hole. The emphasis should be on smooth and true surfaces that promote good ball roll and fun golf, not excessive speed that tortures

Playability concerns arise from excessively fast greens. This situation is a four-putt waiting to happen.

the average golfer for just a slight mistake. Do you really think golf is more fun and exciting to play now than it was 20, 40, 60, or even 100 or more years ago? It is still the same game of strategy, three-dimensional positioning, and skill played outdoors with the same basic set of rules. Are we having more fun than our predecessors did?

And what about that poor turf? Turf problems are sure to arise when your expectations exceed your means with respect to maintaining fast green speeds. Moss, anthracnose, drought stress, traffic, winterkill, and many other turf maladies become magnified by the pursuit of faster and faster greens. Combating these problems requires greater inputs, involving costs that are ultimately passed along to the golfer. It costs more money to maintain faster greens, and increased green fees and/or dues are not likely to cause more people to flock to the game.

This leads us to the unmistakable conclusion . . . that the main emphasis for putting green surface conditioning should be on smooth and enjoyable, not excessively fast. A better pace of play will be realized by most golfers. Setup variability will remain exciting and intriguing, and not merely predictable. Older golf courses can enjoy their classic architecture without being forced into unnecessary or compromising renovation. Surface quality will remain more consistent throughout the year, with fewer inputs required and better ball mark repair — cost savings that can be passed on to golfers. Moderate green speeds also provide a setup more favorable to golfers of differing ability, from novice to expert, and keep the focus of golf on fun.

The next generation of bragging rights at golf courses will not be how fast the greens are, but how good they are. The ultimate challenge will be maintaining smooth and consistent surfaces at a pace that promotes the best golf at a particular golf course. This goal will require skilled maintenance and an understanding and appreciation of the game of golf and related playability to match design. We have proven we can maintain greens that are too fast, even for the very best players in the world. The horticultural Holy Grail must now be replaced with an appreciation of good golf, which may even involve using the Stimpmeter as it was originally intended, as a gauge of consistency from green to green. It is time to get off the road of faster greens and get on the one that leads to good golf for all players, for the good of the game.

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