

Death, Taxes, and Comparing Golf Courses


Golf course comparisons are inevitable; however, get the facts first before you “dare to compare.”

BY LARRY GILHULY

“All golf courses are good. Some are better than others!”

This great quote was first heard several decades ago when a wide-eyed young assistant superintendent (the author) at Seattle Golf Club was in the company of John Zoller, Sr., superintendent of the Eugene Country Club. After I made an unflattering remark about a recently played golf course, Mr. Zoller was quick to point out that every golf course is good, and it does no good to belittle other golf courses without knowing the facts

behind the agronomic and non-agronomic programs that define the condition of the golf course. While architectural discussions are always in the eye of the beholder, let's look a little closer at the comparison dilemma facing virtually every golf course today. More specifically, let's examine why golfers have the need to compare golf courses, the agronomic and non-agronomic differences between golf courses, some tips to avoid comparisons, what to be aware of when comparisons are made in your presence, and the most common comparisons found in the game.

A photograph of a golf course green and sand trap under a cloudy sky. The green is in the foreground, surrounded by sand. In the background, there are trees and a distant horizon.

The amount of hand labor required at every golf course is different.



Lights, camera, action may be best for the U.S. Open, but it is not needed at your golf course on a daily basis. When the cameras go away, even the best golf courses tone down their maintenance practices.

SO WHY DO GOLFERS MAKE COMPARISONS?

They can't help it! The inherent inconsistency of the game, combined with a playing field that is constantly changing, results in situations where excuses for one's own ineptitude need to be found. It can never be the fact that the lack of talent caused the missed shot or the short putt that did not fall. Golfers' egos what they are, it must be the fault of the golf course (maintenance staff) that the greens are too slow, the fairways too short, the roughs too long, and (a personal favorite) the bunkers too "inconsistent." When players begin to complain about another hazard (water) found on golf courses being too wet or too dry, then the bunker consistency issue deserves equal attention!

In addition to this basic human tendency, we are also creatures of habit. For example, Darin Bevard stated it correctly in his USGA Green Section *Record* (Nov./Dec. 2004) article titled "No, It Really Is Not Just Your Golf Course!" This article points out two major reasons why many players choose to make comparisons without understanding all the facts:

- **Head-up vs. head-down syndrome.** This fact was pointed out to me nearly two decades ago by Jim Moore, the USGA's Director of Construction Education. His point (and Mr. Bevard's) is that players generally are not prone to enjoy the surroundings at their own golf course as much as a new course where new vistas and architecture beckon the human eye. At home, the eye has seen all of these features countless times; thus, the eyes tend to go down, and all of the flaws are noticed. It's a very interesting observation, and I agree that this is part of the problem.

- **Big event syndrome.** Generally, this is the major problem with comparisons. Players are invited to participate in special events or tournaments that are specifically prepared for one to four days of play. The comparisons ensue, and then you host the same type of event in which other players from visiting courses go home and make the same inane comparisons of their course to yours. I could not agree more with one golf course superintendent at a prominent private club in the Pacific Northwest who describes his club's way of coping with this situation: "If everyone would just stop going over the top for their

Member-Guest Invitational, the comparisons would die down. We maintain our golf course at a certain standard throughout the year, *including our Member-Guest Invitational*. There is no extra mowing or rolling on the greens, since our members cannot adapt to greens that suddenly are two feet faster than what they are used to. We want all of the players to have fun first, *score as low as possible*, get through the golf course fast, and enjoy the great food and other aspects of our facility. Our goal is to not watch balls trickle off greens due to regular hole locations suddenly becoming unplayable." It sounds like their board of directors has nailed it. Must not be a bunch of low-single-digit players!

There are myriad reasons why golfers feel the need to compare golf courses; however, the previous two offer a great starting point for the *comparaholics* out there who simply cannot resist the urge to compare their golf course with others. Hopefully, those who have made it this far will not require shock treatment to get you to wake up and change the way you look at your golf course and others' courses. Get the facts before you "dare to compare."

ARE THERE AGRONOMIC AND NON-AGRONOMIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GOLF COURSES?

In a word, yes there are! In early May 2004 I saw a perfect example of a comparaholic at a pro shop that will remain unnamed. This player had just played Perfection C.C., where the bunkers were perfect, the greens were perfect, and the fairways were perfect. The following quote, however, crossed the line: *"My home course is a disgrace and I will not bring guests out there due to embarrassment! We need to hire the superintendent at Perfection C.C. since he knows how to maintain a golf course!"* This player then went on to describe in great detail how nice his *winter* had been while playing golf in Palm Springs, and how much better the golf courses were maintained in that area compared to the Pacific Northwest.

After taking a deep breath, I decided that this golfer needed to be educated on a few of the facts that existed between Perfection C.C. and the course where he was a member. These included:



Facts about Perfection C.C.

- Bunkers were renovated winter 2004
- Greens were aerified in March and had completely recovered
- Fairways are not topdressed or aerified in the spring
- Dry weather one week before played

Facts about his home course

- Bunkers are contaminated with fines and scheduled for renovation
- Greens were aerified 10 days before his tirade
- Fairways were sand topdressed heavily and aerified four days before his tirade
- 1" rainfall two days before tirade

Good communication is a key to educating players before they begin making comparisons of playing conditions between golf courses.

Just as there are no two snowflakes the same, there are no two golf courses that are identical, even in regard to the timing of major maintenance programs and weather conditions prior to play. These facts are often forgotten by those who compare the golf course they play all year with a snapshot of a golf course that they may play on one occasion. Unfortunately, most of the differences between golf courses that most impact turf growth, and therefore playing conditions, cannot be seen. As a way of condensing the main differences between golf courses, note the two lists below. The next time you play a golf course, realize that nearly every one of these differences exists between your golf course and the golf course that you just played!

Agronomic Differences

- Climate/geographical
- Grass type
- Construction material used for greens/tees
- Native soil fairways/roughs
- Trees — number and size
- Irrigation age/coverage
- Water quality/quantity
- Timing of major programs — greens/fairway aeration, drainage projects, fairway topdressing, reconstruction

Trees seriously impact turf growth and frost removal during the winter.



Non-Agronomic Differences

- Amount of play
- Course age
- Architectural style (especially greens)
- Green size
- Bunkers — sand type/amount/drainage/size
- Overall maintained acreage
- Budget — staff size
- Equipment age/amount
- Membership philosophy/handicap
- Wildlife — Canada geese, other grass-feeding birds, elk, voles, ground squirrels

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE THE NATURAL TENDENCY TO COMPARE GOLF COURSES?

Trying to change a natural human tendency is virtually impossible; however, making golfers aware of the differences between golf courses can be done to at least minimize the potential for comparisons turning into major issues. The next time you feel the urge to compare your course with a recent round at Perfection C.C., consider the following:

● **Be aware of comparisons — especially when you have a bad day on the links!** As mentioned earlier, a bad day on the greens can often result in a negative perception of the greens just played, rather than the possibility that you may need to take a putting lesson. The same goes for bunker sand and fairway mowing height!

● **Educate others when you hear comparisons.** We have all been around players who can't wait to let their recent rounds of golf at another course be shared with everyone! Although positive comments about any golf course are always worth listening to, keep your radar on when the positives are followed by, "I wish our golf course could be that good." A very simple question should be asked immediately: "Did you play in a tournament or special event?" If the answer is yes, then make the player aware that all golf courses generally receive a little extra maintenance for tournaments, just as yours does.

● **Develop maintenance standards.** The establishment of maintenance standards has been successful in instances when golf courses face changing committees and boards that alter maintenance philosophies on a regular basis. When course comparisons begin to happen, it is very easy to simply state that your golf course superintendent follows a solid set of maintenance standards created by the green committee and with

board approval to assure good playing and growing conditions through the main portion of the playing season. You simply cannot maintain a golf course at tournament levels at all times; thus, your maintenance standards need to be realistic with the regular player in mind.

• **Resist making your golf course (especially greens) dramatically different during your Invitational or Member-Guest!** This point cannot be overstated because it is the main reason why so many comparisons occur in the game today. Focus on creating smooth putting surfaces (who said fast equals good?) that are not more than one foot faster than your golfers normally play. Based on the playing skill anticipated at these events, every golf course would be far faster and more fun to play when greens are in a more reasonable Stimpmeter range of 9-10 rather than the 11+ speeds that usually are associated with the major championships for professional golfers.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON COMPARISONS?

During a recent winter visit to a golf course here in the Pacific Northwest, a unique (and increasingly common) comparison was being made about the condition of this golf course at the time of its Member-Guest Invitational (mid-summer) and the remainder of the year. A low-single-digit member was appalled enough at the condition of the golf course from August to October to write a rather negative letter about his displeasure with the condition of the golf course when compared to the Invitational and when compared to the other older club in this town. This course had suffered through two major rain events exceeding two inches in one week, the return of summer labor to high school and college, falling leaves, and a major reconstruction of the practice facility. It was no wonder that the overall condition of the course suffered in the late summer and early fall! After this Turf Advisory Service visit, the phone rang while I was sitting in the club parking lot preparing to leave. The call was from the superintendent at the other club mentioned in the letter. He laughed when informed about the comparison, as he had just had a letter read at a recent board retreat that complained about the condition of his course and *"how much better the condition was at the course in whose parking lot I was sitting!"*

This true story points out how difficult it can be for golf course superintendents when those

Table 1
Stimpmeter Readings 1977-2004

Course	1977	2004
Broadmoor G.C.	6' 8" - 7' 8"	9' 6" - 10' 6"+
Columbia Edgewater C.C.	6' 11" - 7' 9"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Coos C.C.	7' 2" - 7' 4"	10' 0" - 10' 6"+
Emerald Valley G.C.	7' 4" - 7' 10"	10' 0" - 10' 6"+
Eugene C.C.	6' 7" - 7' 1"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Ilwaco Hills C.C.	6' 0" - 6' 4"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Jefferson Park G.C.	5' 11" - 6' 0"	9' 6" - 10' 6"+
Kitsap G.&C.C.	5' 8" - 6' 2"	9' 6" - 10' 6"+
Longview C.C.	6' 2" - 7' 0"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Meridian Valley C.C.	6' 10" - 7' 0"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Oswego Lake C.C.	7' 0" - 7' 8"	9' 6" - 10' 0"+
Overlake G.&C.C.	6' 10" - 7' 1"	9' 6" - 10' 0"+
Portland G.C.	6' 5" - 7' 0"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Sahalee C.C.	6' 11" - 7' 1"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Seattle G.C.	7' 11" - 8' 1"	10' 6" - 11' 0"+
Tokatee G.C.	6' 7" - 7' 4"	9' 0" - 9' 6"+
Waverley C.C.	6' 6" - 7' 4"	9' 6" - 10' 6"+
Average Increase = 3-4'		

who make the comparisons do not take into account what has happened at their own course versus the snapshot of the club across town. Comparisons seem to be inevitable, but what are the most common areas where comparisons are made and how can they be addressed?

• Greens — usually speed or smoothness.

"Perfection C.C. had the best greens I have ever played. Why can't our greens be that fast/smooth/firm/consistent/etc.?" Question to player: "What tournament were you playing in and how many putts did you have?" Usually the golfer has played in some type of event and had 36 putts or less.

Another interesting discussion concerning green speed that occurs more than it should is a comparison of eras. There are players who absolutely insist that their greens or the greens of their youth were faster (in some cases much faster) than they currently are maintained. Despite being told that mowing heights were much higher three decades ago, these players are not aware that while their greens may have been the fastest in the area, they were not faster when compared to the modern era. Those who still believe in this myth (and the tooth fairy) should note Table 1, taken from USGA Turf Advisory Service visits in 1977, and compare it to the green speed on the same golf courses in 2004. Also, note



Don't let your cup runneth over with poor internal drainage.

Table 2

Southern California Stimpmeter Readings 1991

Course	Stimpmeter
Annondale G.C.	9' 0"
Antelope Valley C.C.	9' 6"
Bakersfield C.C.	9' 0"
Bermuda Dunes C.C.	8' 0"
Big Canyon C.C.	9' 6"
Bighorn G.C.	8' 6"
Canyon C.C.	10' 0"
DeAnza C.C.	9' 0"
Del Rio C.C.	8' 6"
Desert Falls C.C.	8' 2"
Desert Island G.&C.C.	8' 6" - 9' 0"
Dove Canyon C.C.	9' 6"
El Caballero C.C.	8' 6"
Fairbanks Ranch C.C.	8' 6"
Fallbrook G.C.	8' 0"
The Farms	9' 0"
Glendora C.C.	8' 6" - 9' 0"
Industry Hills	8' 6"
Manifee Lakes C.C.	9' 0"
Marbella G.&C.C.	8' 0"
Mesa Verde C.C.	8' 6"
Mission Hills C.C.	9' 0"
Oakmont C.C.	8' 9"
Ojai Valley Inn	8' 6"
Old Ranch C.C.	8' 6"
Riviera C.C.	9' 4"
Rolling Hills C.C.	7' 6"
San Diego C.C.	10' 0"
Torrey Pines	7' 6" (normal) / 9' 6" - 10' 0" Tour
The Vintage Club	8' 6"
Virginia C.C.	8' 6"
Vista Valley	8' 6"
Yorba Linda	9' 0"

the "+" sign to the right of the 2004 green speed. This denotes the normal green speed for tournaments and/or the Member-Guest Invitational. An increase in green speed of 3-4 feet has elevated playing conditions such that they are actually faster now than U.S. Open green speeds of only 20 years ago.

In addition to the Stimpmeter readings in the Pacific Northwest, note Table 2, where Stimp-meter readings were taken in Southern California during 1991. When compared to modern green speeds similar to those found in the Pacific Northwest, an average increase of at least 1-2 feet has occurred in the last 15 years in this area of the United States. Greens faster in the good old days? The numbers don't support this assertion.

• **Bunkers — usually too soft or too hard.**

"The bunkers at Perfection C.C. were perfect. There were no 'fried eggs' and the sand was 'consistent.' Every shot from the bunkers was easy and predictable. Our bunkers stink!" USGA agronomists unanimously agree that the most common complaint heard on golf courses from golfers is inconsistent sand in bunkers. Somewhere between the invention of the game and today, many have forgotten that bunkers are hazards and should be avoided. Golfers never complain that a water hazard is too wet or too dry. They accept (without question) the one-shot penalty and move on to the next shot. However, let one golf ball plug into a bunker, costing a player possibly one shot to extract the ball, or have a ball hit from an area where the sand is thin, and all of the bunkers are considered *inconsistent*. Of course, the bunkers are better at Perfection C.C. — they were prepared for the tournament and it did not rain the day before.

• **Fairways — usually too short.** "The fairways at Perfection C.C. were absolutely perfect. The ball sat up so well that every shot was like hitting off a tee. Why can't we mow our fairways at that height?" When players make this comment, it generally means they played a golf course with good soil, resulting in excellent plant density with very little earthworm activity, few trees in landing zones, and probably covered with Kentucky bluegrass mowed at a higher height! While other cool- and warm-season grasses can produce outstanding fairways at lower mowing heights, many continue to believe that fairways need to be mowed at higher heights to achieve good ball lie. In reality, fairways should be mowed between 1/2" and 5/8" in most situations to provide a

reasonable ball lie while not making the fairways too difficult for the “right arm sweepers” that comprise the majority of all golfers.

● **Color — greenies vs. brownies.** This area of disagreement can trace itself directly back to the beginning of TV golf, with the constant bombardment of nearly perfect conditions shown weekly at your local PGA, LPGA, and Senior PGA tour stops. It has even crossed over the Atlantic Ocean, with Sky TV bringing a growing demand for more green on the local 18-hole links (with a staff of four), while completely forgetting that maintaining grass just for color results in the use of far more “green” than these golf courses have to spend. If we could only turn back the clock in one area of golf course maintenance, it would be to play it fast, firm, and with more brown than viewed on most golf courses in America.

SUMMARY — WARNING SIGNS FOR COMPARAHOLICS

A majority of golfers have fallen into the trap of comparing golf courses without first thinking about the many differences among golf courses, or using a snapshot view of a golf course in tournament condition. To summarize, here are a few observations that can keep you from becoming a comparaholic — a player who simply must compare his golf course to every other golf course in the world.

● Comparaholics are usually found in the pro shop or 19th hole.

- Comparaholics play head down at home and head up away.
- Comparaholics fail to recognize tournament vs. normal playing conditions.
- Comparaholics read far too many “Top 10/100” lists.
- Comparaholics want to make themselves sound important.
- In some cases, comparaholics have an “ax to grind,” and the golf course superintendent is the tree!
- Comparaholics played or putted poorly that day.
- And, finally, in the worst case — some comparaholics just don’t like anything!

The comparisons of golf courses will never end; however, by being aware of the myriad differences among golf courses and the simple fact that tournament conditions are usually quite different from regular course setup, you are well on your way to understanding the difficulty faced by your golf course superintendent on a daily basis. Avoid the “taking it to the next level” and “wanting to go in a new direction” mentality by giving your golf course superintendent the necessary tools within your budget to make your golf course the best it can be. In the end, you will compare favorably without going in any new direction while taking it to the next level.

LARRY GILHULY *does comparative assistance to subscribing golf courses in the Northwest Region of the USGA Green Section.*

