

Aesthetics Should Not Trump Playability

Not perfect, but different shades of green.

BY DARIN S. BEVARD

When did the visual aspects of the golf course become so important at the expense of playability to the average golfer? We routinely see golf courses that provide superb playability: firm, fast conditions and an overall attractive appearance under stressful weather conditions. Yet many golfers seem to focus on small areas of wear or off-color grass that are present on most golf courses during the heat of the summer. They choose to ignore the many positives that a given golf experience provides and emphasize the bad. This raises the question of whether aesthetics have become more important than playability in the daily maintenance of the golf course.

The golf course needs to be attractive to golfers, but there is a difference between off-color or dormant grass and dead grass. This is a very important distinction! Dead grass is not good for anybody. The increased emphasis on firm and fast has created a lot of debate, and many golf courses have embraced this concept. Unfortunately, the exact appearance of the golf course as it relates to providing firm conditioning varies from region to region and even golf course to golf course. Most people seem to agree this is a good idea, especially at some other golf course. Far fewer people agree on how it should manifest itself at their golf course.

Some golf courses have the resources to maintain firm, fast conditions and a canvas of green, but most cannot. You need to choose one or the other. Quite simply, it costs more money to maintain firm, fast, and green during the heat of the summer. Labor resources for hand watering fairways are needed because overhead irrigation systems cannot account for small variances in ground contours or soil conditions that lead to dry spots and



Tolerating isolated areas of off-color turf under stressful weather conditions can allow for better, more consistent playability to be provided on a daily basis. Brown grass is not necessarily dead grass. These areas recover quickly with cooler weather and rain.

brown grass, especially in vast fairway acreages.

Thus, a decision must be made by course officials: maintain to keep everything green in the interest of aesthetics, or apply only enough water, fertilizer, and pesticides to keep the vast majority of the grass green, but accept varying shades of green from time to time in small areas. For medium- and lower-budget golf courses, it is very difficult to satisfy the golfers who think aesthetics are most important and the golfers who believe playability is most important. The golf course superintendent is caught in the middle, and neither camp is satisfied with the results when you try to ride the fence. Course officials must commit to one school of thought and support the management strategies that are needed to be successful.

Would you rather tee off and have the ball roll an extra 15 to 20 yards or hit the fairway and stop in three yards or less? If your choice is to accept some off-color turf here and there, you probably can have your extra roll on the fairway. If you think wall-to-wall

green grass is more important than playability, expect three yards or less. If some areas of a green are off-color, but ball roll is exceptional, this would seem to be a reasonable trade-off.

The bottom line is, in some respects, we can have our cake and eat it too, but it is only possible if the golfer looks at the overall appearance of the golf course and does not focus on minor blemishes. The expense of correcting these minor blemishes is very high for the actual return on investment in terms of labor, water, and pesticides. The focus on playability rather than pure aesthetics is not an excuse for bad management or lack of detail. Rather, it allows for some balance in the way that fine turf areas are managed with the understanding that the desire is for the golf course to have better playability and an overall attractive appearance, but not necessarily perfect green color. There are different shades of green, and aesthetics should not trump playability.

DARIN S. BEVARD is a senior agronomist in the Mid-Atlantic Region.