

An Opinion on Opinions

Opinions and facts related to golf course maintenance – appreciate the difference.

BY LARRY GILHULY

Opinion — A belief stronger than impression and less strong than positive knowledge. A personal view, attitude, or appraisal. A belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty.

Fact — Something that actually exists; reality; truth. A truth known by actual experience or observation; something known to be true.

Golf course superintendents face a tough task on a daily basis, and it has absolutely nothing to do with growing grass. Rather, the task is dealing with the opinions of golfers who play the course that day, which could be upward of several hundred opinions on any given day, depending on the amount of play. Some opinions are positive, some negative, some vocalized in person, and many vocalized at the “19th hole.” While opinions are varied, let’s look at some of the most common ones vocalized by golfers. Let’s also compare them to the facts.

OPINIONS ON PUTTING GREENS

“The greens are too slow!” This is easily the most common opinion expressed by golfers, and it is usually based on personal preference. Like many golfer opinions, it is also frequently related to how well the golfer played that day. Furthermore, it is often uttered when a golfer does not understand that a big part of the game is adapting to the playing conditions that day. It is important for superintendents to ensure that the practice putting green is maintained at the same speed as the regulation putting greens. Doing so gives golfers a chance to “calibrate” their putting strokes prior to beginning their rounds.

“The greens are too fast!” This opinion is usually voiced when hole

locations are placed on slopes. Unfortunately, many golf courses have exceeded their architectural speed limit years ago for the average player. It is important to remember that Stimp-meter readings of 7 and 8 feet were considered reasonably fast just a few decades ago. At these speeds, holes could be located on the steeper slopes common to older greens without adversely impacting putting. However, as green speeds have increased over the years, these same hole locations can prove too difficult for average players. The most difficult combination occurs when the greens are small, heavily contoured, and fast. There may not be enough usable hole locations over which to spread player traffic. Such greens are often targeted for redesign and reconstruction.

“There is no way these greens are 10 feet on the Stimpmeter! They are no more than 6 feet!” This is often mentioned by low-handicap players just after the greens have been measured at or near 10 feet using a Stimpmeter.

“The greens are too hard!” These are often the same people who complain that the greens are too slow and bumpy when they have been watered too much in response to the “too hard” opinions.

“The grain of the turf goes to the setting sun!” The pattern and direction of turf grain varies widely, often within the same green, and regardless of the sun’s position. If grain is present at all, it tends to follow drainage patterns (meaning it generally goes downhill).

“My putt just missed because the hole is ‘volcanoed!’” In most cases, the “volcano” effect, a term used when the area nearest the hole becomes slightly elevated compared to the surrounding putting surface, is actually created by players. It is caused by

golfer foot traffic around the hole or when the hole liner is raised when players remove the flagstick at an angle.

“The greens were great and you ruined them with aeration!” It is true that greens need to be aerated when they are healthy and growing at their best. This ensures the most rapid recovery possible. Aeration is also one of the most beneficial maintenance practices for the turf and, in most cases, an absolute necessity to ensure the long-term health of the greens.

OPINIONS ON BUNKERS

“The bunkers are inconsistent!” Bunkers are hazards that are meant to be avoided. As such, optimum and consistent lies are not to be expected. Interestingly, roughs around the greens are almost always inconsistent, with different grasses, growth habits, and traffic, yet this fact is seldom mentioned by players.

“The bunkers are too soft or too hard!” Although this opinion occasionally has validity in instances where the depth of the sand is much too shallow or if there is far too much sand, this is a little like saying that water hazards are too wet or too dry.

OPINIONS ON TRAFFIC DAMAGE

“Pull carts do not damage areas around the greens!” This opinion is often heard at golf facilities where bare areas between greens and bunkers are very noticeable. Concentrated traffic of any type eventually wears turf thin and compacts the underlying soil. These areas of the course are also very difficult to aerate due to heavy contours and confined spaces. Since these areas frequently come into play, ropes and stakes often must be used

to divert and distribute traffic elsewhere.

“Power carts do not do the damage my superintendent says they do!” It is hard to believe anyone really doubts that carts can cause significant damage to a course. If you know someone who does, please encourage them to read [“Letting the Numbers Tell the Story on Cart Damage”](#) for the facts.

“Traffic does not damage turf when there is frost. The superintendent is just being overprotective of the course!” Any traffic on frosted turf can and does cause turf damage and sometimes the death of the entire plant. Traffic on frosted turf causes those black footprints and tire marks that show up after a frost and remain for weeks, eventually turning brown as the turf dies.

OPINIONS ON FAIRWAYS

“The fairways should be green, but my ball has mud on it in the summer!” Unless you have a very large budget that allows for considerable hand-watering, you are much better off having a few brown areas. Trying to create a totally green golf course will result in overwatering of many areas if the automatic irrigation system is the only source of water.

“The ball has a better lie at a higher mowing height!” In reality, the opposite is true. Regular fairway mowing heights should generally be in the ½- to ¾-inch range, depending on the turfgrass variety used. Higher cuts can result in “flier” lies more typical of roughs. Mowing heights under ½-inch are very difficult for those who attempt to “sweep” the ball (common to many mid- to high-handicap players).

“Fairway topdressing is not needed once the depth of the sand reaches 4 inches!” Fairway topdressing is a long-term commitment, although the annual rate may be reduced once sand has accumulated to the point that it exceeds the depth of standard fairway aeration equipment. Once aeration can be performed without bringing native soil to the surface, aeration cores can be returned (recycled) to the surface to minimize annual sand application inputs.



In my opinion...

Golfers have never been hesitant to offer their opinions to the golf course superintendent. While opinions matter, they matter most when they are based on facts.

MISCELLANEOUS OPINIONS

“The maintenance staff is lazy. I never see them working!” Ideally, you should not see too much of the maintenance personnel, since their goal is to get as much work done as possible before play begins. Whereas your tee time may not be until noon, a typical day for an hourly employee on the grounds crew generally begins around 4:30 or 5 a.m. and finishes by 2 or 3 p.m.

“Golf courses are bad for the environment!” This opinion is often heard from those outside of the game. Decades of scientific research shows the exact opposite to be true. For those wanting to learn more about how golf courses impact the environment, please visit www.usga.org.

“You can’t remove the trees. They make the course!” If trees make your course, then it is a near certainty that your course also has major problems with playability and growing healthy turf.

The above are just some of the more common opinions heard on golf courses over the past several decades. It is hoped that this short article will help illustrate the difference between opinion and fact when it comes to your course. Who knows? The game may even be more fun. But that’s just my opinion.

[LARRY GILHULY](#) is director of the Northwest Region and has been known to give an opinion or two during his nearly 30 years with the USGA Green Section.