

Putting Green Consistency

What it is and what it is not!

BY LARRY GILHULY

During my USGA Turf Advisory Service visits to golf courses, many words are used by those in attendance. Words like *fun*, *tough*, *difficult*, *demanding*, and *beautiful* show what each player thinks of the golf course as a whole. However, when asked about certain portions of a golf course, the word *consistency* crops up as the most commonly used word. The primary focus is on two playing areas: bunkers and greens. Let's take a look at both the perception and reality of how this simple word now dominates the way a golf course is maintained.

Let's start with the word itself. "Consistency — steadfast adherence to the same principles, course, form, etc., marked by harmony, regularity, or steady continuity: free from variation or contradiction." This word has a place in the game, but to assume that golf should be the same every day would require a very large dome over the golf course to eliminate all natural elements, a trained person following every group to rake footprints in the bunkers, every bunker built with identical slopes, and greens prepared multiple times during the day if your tee time changes. Of course, none of this will happen, because the game of golf is played in nature with ever-changing components that make it such a challenge. Good breaks, bad breaks, or rub-of-the-green — call it what you will. But the undeniable truth is that golf is unique, and there is no doubt that consistency is impossible to achieve. So where is the answer? Let's Google it!

If you Google the words *golf* and *consistency*, up pop more than 800,000 results. Of course, the first page is all about swing consistency, as are the next 27 pages until the bottom of page 29, where there is an article by Bud White ([Consistency in Bunkers](#) —

[What Does It Mean?, March/April 2009 USGA Green Section Record](#)) about this very issue — consistency in bunkers. Mr. White's article goes into detail on this subject. You should read this excellent article and send it to your players. It is dead on, but what about the greens and the consistency issue?



Rolling is a common method to achieve consistency on the day you play.

The misuse of the word *consistency* for greens is an entirely different issue. Many players believe that green speed at their golf course should be nearly the same, day in and day out, depending upon the weather. To the extreme, there are golfers who think it should be the same year round. Yet others believe that the green speed should be identical in the morning and afternoon. The true use of the word *consistency* for greens should apply to the day you play the golf course, not day to day, unless it is a special event where players are told and are expecting the same type of playing surface over two to six days, including a practice round. And speaking of practice, let's talk about the practice green.

The practice green is a putting surface that is meant to help golfers practice their putting skills at any time and for warm-up before a round of golf. It is at this time that players must be observant of the green speed, and it should be very close to matching the speed of the remaining 18 greens on the golf course. If all 19 greens come close to matching (within one foot of each other) on that day, they should be considered consistent. For example, if the practice green is measured at 10' on the day of your round of play, the

remaining greens should be within 9'6" and 10'6". Most players cannot perceive one-foot differences, and hole locations are a major factor in perceived green speed. If one green is 8' or 12', then players have a legitimate observation that the greens were not "consistent" when they played. Now comes the difference in the use of the word *consistency*!

Let's say the next week the greens are toppedressed lightly and it rains after they are dragged. The light amount of sand is not completely removed for the next day mowing, resulting in water and sand on the surface, which greatly affects green speed in the morning. The practice green slows to 9' from the normal 10', with all of the greens falling within 8'6" and 9'6". Are the greens consistent? Absolutely! Consistency of greens, day in and day out, should not be the goal of the golf course maintenance staff. Green consistency on the day they are played is the goal and is easily achievable. Also, there is another compelling reason why the word *consistency* should be applied for daily play rather than year-round play.

Just as in all sports conducted outdoors, participants must adapt their game to the conditions being played. The better you can adapt, the better you play. In golf, part of the intrinsic value of the game is how it changes every time you play. Golfers who can adapt their game to what they find on the course that day will generally find their handicaps drop, while those who don't adapt will have higher scores. For this reason, players who adapt to greens on a daily basis will find themselves to be better players when they venture out to other golf courses. Golfers who insist on the same green speeds at all times will struggle on their own golf course and when visiting other sites.

So, the next time the word *consistency* comes up at your golf course, please remember that when this word is used for greens, it is the consistency of all 19 greens on the day you play. If it relates to the bunkers — good luck!

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