

# Practice Like A Pro

Two simple adjustments to the way you practice will result in less wear and faster recovery of range tees.

BY TY McCLELLAN



*Today's golfer loves to practice, but certain practice habits on the range tee can result in more wear to the turf than others.*

Most of us will never play like a professional, but that should not stop us from practicing like one. Attend a professional golf event and you will notice a unique, linear pattern of divots on the practice tee. This article will teach you how to make two simple adjustments to your practice routine that will give you something in common with your favorite touring professional and produce a better conditioned practice range tee all season long for you and the rest of the golfing community to enjoy.

For practice range tees established with cool-season turfgrasses, such as creeping bentgrass or Kentucky bluegrass, late July and early August usually mark the time when golfers complain about excessive divots. Heavy play combined with stressful midsummer conditions leaves little opportunity for seedling establishment or regenerative growth of surrounding turf into divots. For bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, or any other warm-season species, insufficient turf coverage generally becomes most apparent in

late spring or early summer just as the turf is breaking winter dormancy following months of practice range use. In either case, divots are removed faster than the turf can recover. Oftentimes, poor turf coverage on a practice tee indicates that it is simply undersized for the amount of play received, i.e., there is not enough time for turf recovery before tee stations are returned to previous locations. It also indicates the schedule for station rotations needs to be reviewed for efficiency and that synthetic turf options



(Left) Concentrating divots in one area is arguably the worst practice method because it creates large voids requiring the most time for turf recovery. (Right) Scattering divots is a popular practice habit that is frequently taught because it does not create large voids in the turf that are slow to recover, but it removes the most turf in total because a full divot is taken with every shot.

should be considered at the rear of the tee to provide the additional time needed for turf recovery.

With the exception of an efficient tee station rotation, enlarging the tee(s) and adding synthetic turf are improvements typically left for the off-season, when time and funds become available. So, until then, what can be done? The

solution resides with golfers. Since randomly scattering divots can quickly destroy a practice range tee, and concentrating divots into one area creates large voids in the turf that cannot readily recover, the best approach is to shrink one's divots by removing them in a pattern just like the professionals.

### STEP 1

**Practice in a linear pattern by placing each new shot directly behind the previous divot.**

In a typical practice tee station setup, the linear divot method can easily be repeated for up to 15 shots or more, resulting in much less turf being removed with each successive swing. Let's take a look at a practical example that was provided by Chris Pekarek, golf course superintendent at The Village Links of Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Mr. Pekarek estimates more than 2 million shots are taken annually from the 1.25-acre Kentucky bluegrass practice tee and that 1.5 million of the shots result in turf removal. While divots come in all sizes, the average iron shot is believed to remove a divot approximately 3 inches wide by 6.5 inches long, for a total of 19.5 square inches. After just 30 shots, i.e., a small bucket of balls at most golf facilities, approximately 4.1 square feet of turf are removed, given a typical practice routine ( $30 \text{ shots} \times 19.5 \text{ in}^2 = 585 \text{ in}^2 / 144 \text{ in}^2 = 4.1 \text{ ft}^2$ ). Therefore, after an entire season, 205,000 square feet of divots are removed from the tee. That is more than 4.6 acres of turf from the 1.25-acre surface.



STEP 1 (left) – Practice in a linear pattern by placing each new shot directly behind the previous divot. STEP 2 (right) — Leave a strip of live turf at least 4 inches wide between each line of divots. This keeps divots narrow so that lateral growth of turfgrass from both sides of the divot will lead to rapid recovery, and it also protects seedlings from desiccation and mower injury.

**To maximize the use of the grass on the driving range tee, please place your ball at the grassy back edge of your previous divot, removing just a small portion of grass with each swing.**



Communicate the message. Visual aids, such as this sign at Stone Creek Golf Club in Oregon, can be placed on the practice tee for all players to see.

If instead each shot is played directly behind the previous divot, subsequent divots are reduced to an average size of 3 inches wide by 2 inches long, or 6 square inches. After 30 shots, this pattern only removes 1.4 square feet of turf. (As the first divot removes 19.5 square inches and the subsequent 14 divots or more remove just 6 square inches each, for a total of 84 square inches, a total of 103.5 square inches is removed for every 15 shots, which is typical for this linear pattern. For 30 shots, or a small bucket of balls, 2 linear divot strips  $\times 103.5 = 207 \text{ in}^2 / 144 \text{ in}^2 = 1.4 \text{ ft}^2$  are removed.) If everyone adopted this method, the annual divots removed would be reduced from 205,000 square feet to just 70,000

square feet. That is a 65% reduction in the amount of turf removed.

Now that we have identified the linear pattern as the best practice method that results in the least amount of turf loss from divot removal, the next step is to ensure rapid turf recovery.

### STEP 2

#### **Leave a strip of turf between each line of divots.**

For the best results, at least four inches of live turf should be left between the linear divots, or just more than the width of the iron being used. The remaining strips of turf are of great importance because they serve two critical purposes in expediting the healing process.

**Lateral growth of surrounding vegetation** — Lateral growth from surrounding turf can provide rapid divot recovery when new growth only needs to creep in an inch or two from each side of the void. This spreading process takes much longer when large areas of turf are removed and the diameter of the divot pattern is closer to a foot or more. This is especially true for turfgrasses that rely on recovery from stolons (laterally growing above-ground stems), such as creeping bentgrass; rhizomes (laterally growing underground stems), such as Kentucky bluegrass; or both rhizomes and stolons, such as zoysiagrass and bermudagrass.

**Seedling protection** — For turf that relies partially on seeding for recovery, such as creeping bentgrass, or completely, such as perennial ryegrass, several inches of remaining turf between linear divots help protect seedlings from wind desiccation and mower damage.

So, whether or not you play like a pro, you can certainly practice like one. The linear divot method is recommended because it minimizes turf loss, and leaving a strip of turf between linear divots leads to faster turf recovery. Implementing this simple divot pattern into your practice regime works for all turfgrass species and will have significant season-long benefits at your facility.

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[TY McCLELLAN](#) was an agronomist in the Green Section's Mid-Continent Region for five years before becoming the manager of Green Section Education in 2012. It remains to be seen if "practicing like a pro" will have any effect on his handicap index.