

## Where is Green Speed Taking the Game?

*Are ultra-fast putting greens threatening to ruin the game we love?*

*--Larry Gilhuly and Matt Nelson*

A search for *green speed* in the Turfgrass Information File (TGIF) database at Michigan State University produces a count of 543 articles. A search of the *Green Section Record* reveals that green speed has been discussed in 75 articles since the 1920s. In both instances more than 97 percent of these articles have been published since 1977, the year the Stimpmeter was introduced. As a frequently discussed issue, speed is a relatively new phenomenon in golf's long and rich history.

A majority of the articles in turfgrass publications report on the short- and long-term consequences of turfgrass health when pursuing fast greens for an extended time. It is well documented that low mowing, frequent grooming and excessive rolling of putting surfaces can increase physiological stress in the turf, increase disease activity, promote weed invasion and generally diminish the reliability of the turfgrass stand.

When it comes to green committees, course officials, owners and many golfers, these arguments of turf quality and sustainability often fall on deaf ears. Unrealistic comparisons between golf courses are commonly made, and it becomes the burden of the golf course superintendent to meet expectations, realistic or not.

The turfgrass industry itself has contributed greatly to the green speed debate. While on one hand agronomic problems relating to turfgrass performance and reliability are often pinned on the pursuit of increased ball roll, better mowers, improved plant protectant compounds, safer plant growth regulators, refined cultivation techniques, more sophisticated irrigation, increased superintendent training and the advent of the information age have all enabled turfgrass managers to achieve faster greens more safely. If you want your putting greens to roll 13 feet as measured by the Stimpmeter, we have the technology. Do you have the cash and the conviction to commit to the necessary programs? All of them?

The point of this article is not to debate the agronomic reality of maintaining consistently fast greens in any particular climate or location, but rather to draw attention to the playability concerns that arise from excessively fast greens. The authors have found that golfers are likely to accept playability issues as a reason to limit green speed, especially if a broad spectrum of the membership is apprised of the problems fast greens can cause.

During the past 25 years or so since the advent of the Stimpmeter, green speeds have increased by three to four feet at golf courses in the Pacific Northwest and intermountain regions of the U. S. This represents about a 50 percent increase in ball roll in this time period. These statistics are based on green-speed readings taken during USGA Turfgrass Advisory Service visits from the late 1970s to the present. The numbers are real, not fictitious, despite the most *keen* memories of any long-time player. In fact, regular membership green speeds at many golf courses today exceed national championship green speeds of only 10 to 20 years ago. Interestingly, the average handicaps of American golfers is 16.1 for males and 29.2 for females.

**What's wrong with fast greens? They slow down play!** If any golfer goes through the same pre-shot routine with each putt, consider that it naturally takes longer to hit four putts than three. Fast greens make it increasingly difficult to stop a golf ball close to the hole, especially on longer putts and when contours are presented. Arguably, it is even more difficult to play delicate pitch shots from around greens and stop the ball near the hole (or even on the green), leading to slower play.

Slow play is regularly cited as a primary deterrent to golfer participation and is a major industry concern. Green speed doesn't have to be rolled back to the days when a putter required a little loft, but some measure of control will increase enjoyment for the majority of players while keeping them moving along.

**Interesting hole locations are lost.** As greens become faster, certain portions of the putting surface are no longer acceptable for fair hole replacement. No one likes to see a missed putt roll back to him, or a well-struck putt roll completely off a green when missing the hole. Even subtle contours can become unacceptable when green speeds are too fast, and this compromises the original strategy and design intent of many great golf greens, and also results in limited set-up possibilities. Some wonderful old golf greens now have only two or three good hole locations because of the demand for excessive green speed. Set-up becomes stale, and much of the fun and excitement of the golf course is lost.

Another worrisome trend at present is the reconstruction of many challenging and interesting older golf greens to accommodate modern green speed. In some cases such renovation is completely valid and supported, but at least as many more would be better served by moderating speed and enjoying the dynamics of the design. New putting-green design is limited as compared to older golf courses with surface contours and corresponding approach-shot value and variability.

**Ball marks and old holes are slower to heal.** With less grass on greens to cushion the blow from incoming shots and less leaf area for recovery, it is no wonder ball marks are a problem of epidemic proportion at busy facilities. Golfers can appreciate problems with ball marks when they contribute to missing an easy three-footer, and even those ball marks properly repaired are slow to heal because of the aforementioned limitations in turfgrass canopy.

A much tighter margin of error with plug replacement of old holes is realized by closer and closer mowing. Mechanical injury to grass in the summer months usually requires several weeks or more to heal, and if a green has become limited to only two of three areas for hole locations, these concentrated plugs become an eyesore and putting quality is compromised.

**Golf course set-up is for a minority of players.** The set-up of golf courses with very fast greens caters to the minority of golfers who are the best players. As mentioned above, chip shots and longer putts are almost impossible for the average player, thereby diminishing the fun factor and slowing the pace of play. Golf is an extremely difficult game for the overwhelming majority of players and does not need to be more frustrating.

**Fast greens put the emphasis on “championship” rather than “fun.”** Increasing fun and decreasing frustration would seem to be a logical approach to growing the game of golf. So many golf courses today are striving to provide so-called championship conditions on the putting greens every day, rather than considering fun and enjoyable golf for all players. Better drivers, irons and golf balls are all marketed to make it easier to hit it like the pros and with greater replication. Even if it does not improve scoring, most golfers like to hit the ball a little better.

The same argument can be made for putting green conditioning. Most golfers want to see the ball go in the hole. The emphasis should be on smooth and true surfaces that promote good ball roll and fun golf, not excessive speed that tortures the average golfer for just a slight mistake. Do you really think golf is more fun and exciting to play now than it was 20, 40, 60 or even 100 or more years ago? It is still the same game of strategy, three-dimensional positioning and skill played outdoors with the same basic set of rules. Are we having more fun than our predecessors did?

**And what about that poor turf?** Turf problems are sure to arise when your expectations exceed your means with respect to maintaining fast green speed. Moss, anthracnose, drought stress, traffic, winterkill and many other turf maladies become magnified by the pursuit of faster greens. Combating these problems involves costs that are ultimately passed along to the golfer. It costs more money to maintain faster greens, and increased green fees and/or dues are not likely to cause more people to flock to the game.

**This leads up to the unmistakable conclusion...***that the main emphasis for putting green surface conditioning should be on smooth and enjoyable, not excessively fast.* A better pace of play will be realized by most golfers. Set-up variability will remain exciting and intriguing, and not predictable. Older golf courses can enjoy their classic architecture without being forced into unnecessary or compromising renovation. Surface quality will remain more consistent throughout the year. Cost savings can be passed on to golfers. Moderate green speed also provides a set-up more favorable to golfers of differing ability, from novice to expert, and keeps the focus of golf on fun.

Bragging rights at golf courses will not focus on how fast the greens are, but how good they are. The ultimate challenge will be maintaining smooth and consistent surfaces at a pace that promotes the best golf at a particular golf course. This goal will require skilled maintenance and an understanding and appreciation of the game of golf and the related playability to match design.

We have proven that we can maintain greens that are too fast, even for the best players in the world. The horticultural “holy grail” must now be replaced with an appreciation of good golf, which may even involve using Stimpmeter as it was originally intended, as a gauge of consistency from green to green. It is time to get off the road of faster greens and get on the one that leads to good golf for all players, for the good of the game.

***Larry Gilhuly ([lgilhuly@usga.org](mailto:lgilhuly@usga.org)), director, and Matt Nelson ([mnelson@usga.org](mailto:mnelson@usga.org)), agronomist, represent the U. S. Golf Association Green Section’s Northwest Region***