

Management practices affecting putting green speed

Today's golf course superintendent is in the middle of a hotly debated issue concerning the putting speed of golf greens. On one hand, club members see professional golfers playing every weekend on the best maintained golf courses in the world. Not a blade of grass is missing or out-of-place. Even drainage ditches and creek banks are completely covered with lush, dark green turf. The greens putt like glass and the pros actually complain that the greens are too fast. Everything seems to be perfect and the members have trouble understanding why their home course can not be in this type of condition.

However, on the other hand, the superintendent wisely knows what is required in terms of money, time, labor, and resources to obtain this type of 'tournament' playing condition. These courses spend up to 5 years preparing for this one tournament and have spared no expense in achieving the best possible playing surface. Members do not realize that the greens have been pampered for months leading up to the tournament, often not allowing membership play during this period. The finest equipment and supplies have been purchased and used on the greens. Most of the greens are built to the latest technology with the optimum components that allow perfect soil water content control.

As with most things in life, a reasonable compromise must be struck to keep the majority of members happy yet not be so cost prohibitive. Before using putting speed as the sole criteria for judging the quality of a green, other components that influence this need to be discussed. A high quality green should be uniform in terms of density and coverage, deeply rooted, and free of disruptions from insects, diseases, or weeds. The individual leaves and tillers should be oriented vertically to eliminate grain. It does not necessary need to be dark green in color and lush in growth. **A diminishing quality putting surface can be expected if speed is emphasized long-term over other components of a good golf green.**

Golf course officials should first decide on the desired speed for normal play and that for tournament play. This decision should be based on the desires of the members as well as the amount of normal play received by the course, the superintendent's knowledge and experience, money, equipment and other resources the club can make avail-

able to maintain the greens. Before unrealistic speeds are outlined by the club, reasonable expectations of the resources available to the superintendent should be discussed. Grooming putting surfaces to maximize green speed and quality involves:

1. Mowing practices
2. Fertilization
3. Aerification and topdressing
4. Brushing/combing
5. Water management

Mowing

Many times mowing height is the only point emphasized as influencing the speed of putting greens. Although mowing height is an important component of influencing speed, it is by far not the only component influencing this factor. If speed is attempted to be maintained solely on putting height, long-term decline of the bermudagrass can be expected.

Bermudagrass putting surfaces in Florida can maintain everyday acceptable putting quality with routine mowing at a height of 3/16 inch. Heights maintained above this are healthier for the turf but provide slower putting speeds by today's standards. Constant mowing below 3/16 can weaken the turf and result in some of the problems previously discussed.

Three to five days prior to a major tournament, mowing height can be reduced from 3/16 inch to 5/32 or 1/8 inch. Tifdwarf bermudagrass is better adapted to these lower mowing heights than Tifgreen. Research shows that by reducing the mowing height to 5/32 inch, an **increase** in putting length is approximately 8 inches. This reduction should occur in steps of 1/32 inch increments to prevent scalping.

Research also indicates that double cutting two days in advance of a major tournament and continuing this practice during the tournament, will **increase** the putting speed approximately 6 inches. If double cutting is incorporated, it is suggested that the clean-up mowing lap be made only once since this extra lap imposes additional turning stress on the grass and increases soil compaction.

A regular mowing schedule is also an important mechanism in developing and maintaining a high quality putting green. Putting green speed will be optimized with daily mowing compared to three times weekly. Except on the day the green is left