

Speed Demons

Who's to blame in the need for speed?

BY MATT NELSON

Whether or not faster greens are good for the game of golf is a question that has and will continue to be debated. Those who oppose ever-faster putting surfaces cite agronomic problems, increased maintenance costs, environmental issues, slow play, architecture that has become unsuitable or obsolete, and flat participation in the game of golf. On the flip side, some golfers continue to demand fast greens and, in many cases, gauge putting green quality on pace alone. Championships, televised golf, and a majority of local golf events regularly showcase smooth and slick surfaces that no doubt were achieved through weeks or more of special preparation. Golfers have become accustomed to this level of conditioning and now expect it on a daily basis. The turf management industry has responded with better equipment and products, improved management techniques, and very skilled golf course superintendents. If we are to identify the demons in the need for speed, we need not look any further than ourselves.

Many in our industry may be quick to identify the Stimpmeter as speed demon no. 1. While the device was introduced to the industry as a means of maintaining consistency and to keep green speed reasonable throughout an event or during the season, it is commonly used today as a speed stick for some glorified notion of excellence. Bragging rights, ridiculous comparisons between golf courses, discussion fodder for 19th-hole agronomists, and a means of gauging superintendent performance have become dangerous uses of the

Stimpmeter. But blaming the Stimpmeter for excessive green speed is taking the easy way out. The Stimpmeter can be, has been, and continues to be used to keep speeds reasonable. If the USGA had not introduced it to the game, someone else would have. Golfers and superintendents asked for a way to measure green speed and they got it, for better or worse.

Often, the most difficult demons to confront are those within. The Stimpmeter instruction manual doesn't come with directions to triple cut at 0.085, double roll, groom, and starve the turf to increase green speeds. Competitive superintendents and course officials led the way in increasing green speeds and dug themselves and their colleagues into a black hole from which they can't escape. The turf industry has responded with better mowers, improved cultivation tools and techniques, better products to regulate growth and keep turf alive with barely any leaf tissue, and advanced irrigation engineering.

Televised coverage of professional golf tournaments (the glamour demon) has been the vector for bringing speed to the masses. Somehow we've all arrived at the conclusion that faster is better. Speed has become ingrained in our collective golf psyche in a very short period of time.

Whether or not it's good for golf's long-term future, the game has evolved considerably in the last few decades and rolling back the clock isn't likely. Turf managers may think that ever-increasing green speed is plotting a course of inevitable agronomic failure, but we've said that before. It does seem to me, however, that we will reach a point

where a majority of golf courses will be forced to present stale setups or "goofy golf" unless they absolutely flatten the contours and interest in their greens, whether designed by Tillinghast or Tinkerbell.

Confronting the demons of green speed will require nothing more than common sense. Additional measurement tools for putting green quality probably won't solve our problems. As Bobby Jones once said, "There is little room for entertaining the hope that putting may be reduced to a science. Good putting is at best a fleeting blessing. Here today, gone tomorrow."

Green speed has caused unnecessary agronomic problems. Faster speeds have created extremely difficult playing conditions for all but the most accomplished golfers. Slow play, higher maintenance costs and increased pesticide use can be attributed to excessive green speed. So can lost hole locations and putting green renovation.

Whether fast greens are good or bad for golf is debatable. The game is plenty difficult and time consuming to play and doesn't need to become harder or more expensive. Conquering the demons of speed will require self-examination by the industry, arguably for the good of the game and its future. Whether you blame the abilities of competitive superintendents, misguided course officials, a speed stick, or televised golf, we should be focusing on a fun, affordable game for the majority of golfers.

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