

Ok, So Maybe Speed Doesn't Kill – But It Sure Can Hurt

It is not difficult to understand our collective fondness for old-time, “classic” golf courses. Part of this comes simply from a comfort level associated with any familiar presence. Another aspect of our appreciation of older courses is the suspicion that, due to the absence of heavy earth-moving equipment and motorized golf carts, their designs are inherently more imaginative than their modern counterparts.

(The phenomenon is not limited to golf courses: Asked to choose, sight unseen, between comparably sized houses – one built a hundred years ago, the other just completed – respondents in a recent survey overwhelmingly picked the older house. Typical of the reasons cited for the choice were that it was likely to be better built and have “more character.”)

Golf course architects often acknowledge this attraction to classical features by including pot bunkers, saw-toothed bunkers, and other throwback elements in their otherwise modern designs. But while “classic” seems by definition a good thing, not all the individual features loosely associated with the term are desirable in the context of the way golf is played today. An especially bad fit comes in trying to combine the more drastic contours of old-style greens with the much-faster putting speeds we have come to expect today.

I say “especially bad” because the problem is so prevalent. In fact, in my 20-plus years as a practicing golf course architect, I estimate that seven out of ten courses I have had the good fortune to play, visit, or consult for have shown some symptoms of this contour-versus-speed syndrome. Sometimes the problem is confined to a single putting surface; sometimes it is evident in a half-dozen cases.

The complexity and severity of the dilemma can vary widely, but its nature is fundamentally the same: The greens no longer “work” because their precipitous slopes were never intended to be combined with today’s “normal” green speeds of roughly 10, sometimes more, on the Stimpmeter.

You would anticipate this problem in the case of a course built at the turn of the 20th century – given the tendency in recent years to equate pure speed on the greens with “quality” – but it also rears its head at much younger courses, a kind of unintended consequence. In the face of exponential improvements in agronomy and mowing equipment, maintaining the integrity of the playing experience has, in this respect, become more difficult.

Thus, many green complexes were once cut to heights and otherwise maintained to generate speeds of six to eight on the Stimpmeter – invented in the early 1900s and in increasingly wide use ever since. Today, many superintendents find themselves in a bind between hewing to that standard and

(continued on page 21)

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acceding to customer preferences – members in the case of private clubs, patrons at resorts and other public facilities. Striking a harmonious balance is impossible without some sort of remedial action.

Instead, many club managers and green committee chairmen reluctantly – and erroneously — conclude that the best solution is just to tolerate a few bad greens. In rare instances this may be true; in many more situations, however, this conclusion is based on misperceptions concerning what fixing the contour-versus-speed problem would entail. These misperceptions include:

- the construction will cause significant disruption in play
- remodeled greens will differ from unaltered ones in their receptivity to approach shots
- putting speeds will be substantially different on the “new” greens in comparison to the old ones
- greens that have been remodeled will require extensive new maintenance practices
- the original architect’s design intent

will be lost in the remodeling

- remodeled greens will look incongruous in relation to existing ones

Though these apprehensions sound logical and may have a grain of truth, my view is that they range from exaggerated to downright false. In short, a well-conceived remodeling project is virtually certain to be the superior answer.

For starters, the correct redesign and construction method will complete the green remodeling process in 10 days or less, while the grow-in time needed for the sod to re-root and “take” may be as little as 7 to 10 days. True, a temporary green must be used during this interval, but it’s much shorter than most people anticipate and well worth the trade-off.

It’s All Underground

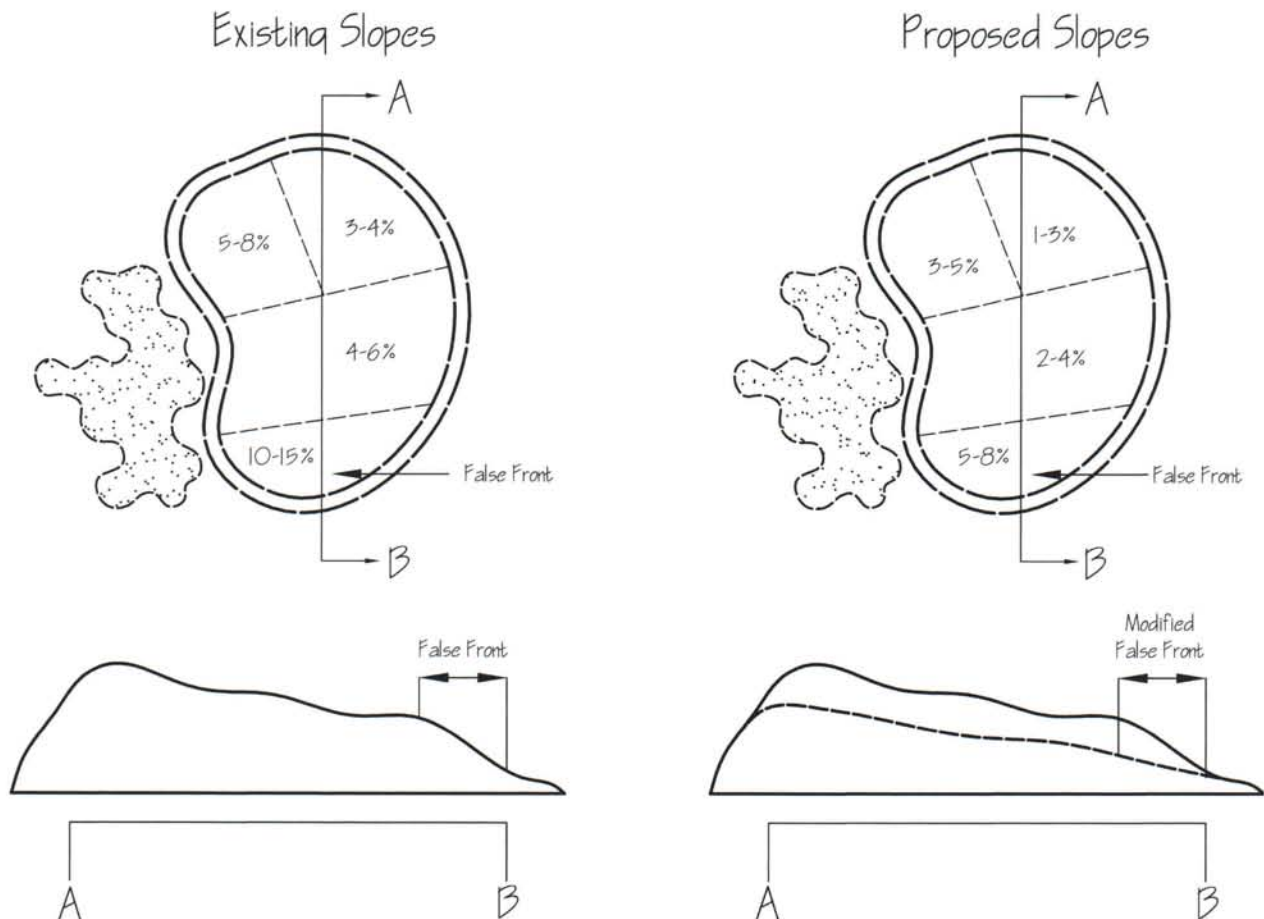
What’s more, a discerning design and construction strategy will, in due time, ensure not only that the remodeled green receives incoming shots and putts like the other greens on the course, but also now has con-

tours in synchronicity with the desired green speed. One such successful strategy is to use the course’s existing topdressing and greensmix in the new “tested” greensmix that will perform to USGA Green Section Specifications. The use of a USGA-approved soils testing laboratory, as we strongly encourage our clients to do, guarantees adherence to these specifications.

This approach contrasts with that advocated by many design and agronomic consultants today. They recommend either using a course’s existing topdressing and greensmix or completely replacing the greensmix with new materials prepared off-site.

I would like to add a third option. Reusing the former greensmix, which in many cases is just old topsoil ‘push – up’ greens, may result in a hard, compacted green surface in the remodeled green if the old mix or topsoil contained a significant amount of fine particles, typically clay, silt, or very fine sand. The resulting question I frequently hear is: “My old ‘push-

(continued on page 23)



up' greens worked before in terms of drainage and how they held a shot, why wouldn't they work again?"

My response is that the older greens commonly developed small soil fractures and fissures over time, which in turn helped minimize compaction and allowed proper infiltration and percolation to occur. This would be lost over the first several years after remodeling in the remodeled greens, as the replacement of the existing mix would compact to a higher degree. It will take time and some significant aeration and aggressive topdressing practices to reduce this compaction and regain the deep soil fractures and fissures that were once present. If you can put up with the compaction for the first several years after the remodeling, while educating members or public players, then this is a viable option.

Another proposed solution I regularly hear — just replace the old greensmix with new USGA approved greensmix. This option leads to remodeled greens that receive incoming shots and putt much differently

from the layout's unaltered greens. This tack may also require dramatically different maintenance practices than original unaltered greens. I often tell superintendents to avoid this option unless they commit to a long term remodeling program which entails new USGA greensmix being incorporated into all the remaining greens over no less than a three-year time frame. If you can put up with greens that vary in how they putt and receive incoming shots for approximately three years after the initial remodeling begins, while educating members or public players, then this is a viable option. I am sad to report that many superintendents find, during this three-year period, that players complain significantly about the difference in the new green's playability compared to the old, unaltered greens.

Many companies utilize both methods described above but few use a hybrid of the two. We also believe in off-site mixing using new greensmix but also using a portion of the existing greensmix in this new greens-

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mix being prepared. The new greensmix must meet USGA Green Section Specifications, in terms of overall testing requirements, based on testing at an approved soils testing laboratory. Accordingly, the newly remodeled green(s) may not receive shots and may not putt in exactly the same manner as other, unaltered greens. But they will much more closely approximate the receptivity and

(continued on page 25)



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putting characteristics than would be the case using the first two strategies. Our experience confirms that the nominal expense and effort required to implement this hybridized method pays off in enhancing the golf experience. The problem with this method is that it will work only when remodeling portions of a few greens. You will need a source to start with, i.e., a portion of a practice putting green or nursery green from which to borrow old greensmix. It will be gathered and transported off-site to the company doing the mixing.

We also suggest recycling sod from the existing green and collar, where possible, to promote continuity between the old green and the remodeled edition. In cases where the remodeled green is larger than the former existing green, we advocate using sod from the collar for the green's expansion, then gradually bringing the height of this sod down, over time, to the green's mowing height. We recommend using this collar-height sod in the back of the green while using the existing green sod from the back of the green in the remodeled area. This method minimizes player disturbance as most players are short, left, or right in their approaches to a green rather than long. Sod for the collar can then come from existing turf at the beginning of the fairway. That sod is brought down in mowing height in increments until it matches the height of the existing unaltered collar grass.

Naturally, special attention to maintenance issues is required at the outset to nurture newly planted or transplanted turf. Nonetheless, a

comprehensive approach to the remodeling process will produce remodeled greens that soon blend – both esthetically and in terms of the maintenance they demand – with the course's other green complexes.

The question of adulterating or compromising the original architect's design intent is always more problematic than purely agronomic issues. A perfectly legitimate concern, it inevitably leads to other questions: How important is this to the membership or the regular patrons of the course? Does the original designer enjoy a reputation that, in its own right, makes his work worth preserving? Can his perceived design intent be reconciled with the game's modern-day evolution and the course's overall goals?

Creating Cupping Areas

An object lesson comes from an anonymous private club in the eastern U.S. and helps elucidate the delicate balance for which to strive. Designed by the legendary Willie Park, its heritage is beyond dispute. Still, with 27,000 rounds per year, the superintendent was struggling to maintain healthy turf, particularly on a par 3 green where 70 percent of the 5,000-square-foot putting surface had grades of four to eight percent, sometimes more, while the remaining 30 percent had more comfortable contours of one to four percent. Similar proportions existed on four other greens and, as the superintendent was required to maintain putting speeds of 11 to 12, these were places where any three-putt was deemed a good effort.

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The superintendent reasoned that a putting surface with at least 4,500 square feet of additional surface in the one-to-four-percent-slope range would present a much more reasonable and fair test of golf, not to mention maintenance. The membership's concern was that Park's "false front" of five-plus percent – a trademark element in his original designs and the overall challenge of the green — would be lost in the redesign.

My company's redesign included an increase to 5,800 square feet in overall green surface — an additional 800 square feet, in other words. The new surface area maintained a gentler but still visually apparent and challenging "false front" on a four-to-seven-percent grade, while 4,500 square feet of the green now exhibits an interesting variety of one-to-four-percent contours with modified, but still preserved, challenge in the three-to-four percent range. The superintendent gained 3,000 square feet of new "cupping" area to more evenly distribute play and related wear

(continued on page 27)

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and tear. For their part, the membership was happy to see the additional one-to-four-percent cupping areas of the remodeled green while the “false front” to the green and the overall challenge was still preserved.

Granted, from a purely mathematical standpoint 6,500 square feet might have made more sense given the 27,000-round volume on the course. However, Park’s greens, appropriate to their era, are generally small. The 6,500 square feet would have constituted the proverbial “sore thumb.” Putting surfaces on the course’s other par 3s average 5,000 square feet – an area for which the superintendent was able to maintain top-quality conditioning of the bent/poa greens.

New and the Old

“Will the remodeled green look out of place?” This an excellent question, one that goes to the heart of the golf course architect’s design philosophy, appreciation of the game’s history and traditions, and critical judgment. For every sensitive interpretation of an original

designer’s concepts, there is, regrettably, an atrocity – the equivalent of a red crayon stripe across a classical canvas, often made in the name of “progress” but conspicuous in its affront to context. Thus choosing a golf course architect with significant classical design restoration experience is a must. This maximizes the potential to blend the classical look of the restored, renovated, or remodeled green in harmony with the existing classical green complexes that remain unaltered.

On the opposite side of the ledger is blind obeisance to the original architect’s drawings and exact specifications, some of which may be impossible or undesirable to preserve. Classical design elements are generally worth maintaining, but in a few cases existing green design is of poor quality and does not possess any attributes that warrant restoring. Golden Age golf course architects had bad days, too, after all.

Fortunately, modern design software, with its three-dimensional display capabilities, allows architects and

clients alike to make informed choices about putting speeds, contours, what to keep, and what to tweak.

In closing, don’t hold on to greens that don’t “work” with your current putting speeds. Creative and carefully conceived redesign, coupled with a prudent and timely construction method, will yield the desired results with minimal disruption to play and with the lowest-possible cost and emotional travail.

You may prefer the 100-year-old house, but that doesn’t mean you will be foregoing central heat and air conditioning. Faster putting speeds have generally added intrigue to the already intricate game of golf, and, unfortunately, this seems unlikely to change any time soon. Neither will our devotion to the game’s history. A reasonable synthesis of the two is achievable as long as we watch our slopes and speeds.



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