Getting Nowhere Fast
*When it comes to course conditioning, speed kills*

Multiple versions of this article have appeared dating as far back as 2007 to recent rewrites in 2014

By John R. Bladon, P.Ag

This reference to speed junkies does not pertain to the addicts parked at an intersection in the seedier part of town. Besides, I’m starting to believe that the label is much more appropriate to the golf business in which we work and play.

In any business we often consider statistics year over year as a measurement of progress. If indeed this is the case, it’s time to conduct a large-scale historical comparison in golf. Over the past 25 years, some disturbing statistics suggest that golf may be on a collision course of sorts. The United States Golf Association suggests that “ball roll” on putting greens has increased by upwards of 50 percent since stimpeter readings began in the 1970s. Since my turfgrass internship 20 plus years ago, the average height of cut on greens has dropped somewhere in the neighbourhood of 40 to 50 percent. You may surmise that the two go hand in hand. But while the height of cut is indeed a piece of the puzzle, green speed can also be influenced by managing the rates and intervals of any of the following inputs: irrigation, rolling, fertility, top dressing and other cultural methodologies. So, big picture - where is the quest for speed taking us?

When we consider a 50 percent historical increase in ball roll, speed is indeed driving courses - particularly older courses - toward architectural obsolescence. With some simple mathematics we quickly see that a 5,000 square foot putting green built anywhere between the dawn of the century and 1970 is now being maintained in such a way that it plays more like a 2,500 square foot green. If that green has any slopes within its makeup, it may even play smaller than that with fair hole locations being lost because of the combination of old slope and new speed.

What effect does this have on playing the game? Invariably, this leads to the fewer greens hit in regulation, more balls rolling through the green and into the rough, more chipping and, finally, additional three- and four- putts. You say rounds are getting longer at your favourite club or course? Look no further.

In terms of agronomics, the pressure to achieve greater green speeds most certainly has consequences for turfgrass. Where bentgrass is the preferable plant for putting surfaces because of its consistency, superior quality and winter hardiness in Canada, lower heights of cut and other forms of environmental stress that are induced while promoting greater green speed weaken bent grass and promote “poa” or annual bluegrass invasion. Most agronomists would
suggest that overall, annual bluegrass is a more expensive plant to maintain. It has a shallower root structure and is therefore prone to more disease and drought pressures than creeping bent. Finally, lower heights of cut reduce the total amount of leaf blade surface area and therefore reduce the turfgrass plant’s ability to gather light and photosynthesize, thereby hindering its competitive abilities and leading to necessary and expensive countermeasures throughout the golfing season. By the way, all these countermeasures invariably end up in the price of a green fee or membership. You say pitch marks have reached infestation levels, that moss has taken hold at your favourite course or that the cost of the game is continuing to rise? Look no further. The above interrelationships are intrinsically tied. The quest for tournament-type conditioning across the board has pushed the rising cost of the game even further, the pace of play to epidemic levels and driven historic architecture to the edge of being inapplicable in today’s golf world. Ironically, for major televised tournaments, it takes weeks, months and, at times, years to produce conditions for the week of the actual event. Rarely are these conditions maintainable day in and day out.

Should we not be concerned with how smoothly greens are rolling rather than how fast? And what about conditioning consistent with our ability to play the game rather than a major championship? In the end, reasonable fees, improved pace of play and architectural integrity would certainly be the benefactors. Breaking 100 periodically with less than 40 putts wouldn’t be bad either.

About the Canadian Turfgrass Advisory Group (CTAG): With Canada’s base of professional turfgrass managers under growing pressures including system management, regulatory and budgetary pressures and the continued demand for an end product near perfection, the need for a highly specialized audit and service based group led by a team of specialists has become great. CTAG is considered Canada’s leading expert group on golf course, sport turf and general turfgrass management and is dedicated to fostering a more sustainable approach to management strategies while reducing risks. They also offer education and support to turfgrass invested parties nationally and abroad via consultation. For more information contact John R. Bladon, Project Coordinator and Senior Specialist via email at jbladon.chimeragroup@rogers.com or follow the group on Twitter @CANturfgrassAG