

The New Definition of Golf Course Conditioning

Golf Digest takes a new view.

BY RON WHITTEN

EDITOR'S NOTE: As most golfers know, *Golf Digest* magazine annually compiles a variety of rankings in the world of golf. The best known is probably their 'America's Greatest Courses,' but they also rank 'Greatest Public Courses,' 'Best Courses by State,' and 'Best New Courses.' The rankings generate tremendous interest, and courses want to be as high in the rankings as possible. The changes in the ranking procedure outlined in Mr. Whitten's article emphasize playing quality over appearance and are very much welcomed by the Green Section.

Somewhat lost in *Golf Digest's* comprehensive 30-page examination of the game's role in the environment ("How Green is Golf?" *Golf Digest*, June 2008) was the announcement of a fundamental change in how we at the magazine view course conditioning in our various course ranking surveys. We abandoned the idea that courses should have lush, green, perfectly uniform grass and adopted the position that dry, firm turf provides the best conditions for playing golf.

Here's how that came about. Last winter, architects Pete and Alice Dye, speaking for the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), urged us to incorporate an environmental factor into the formula we use to determine our various course rankings (America's 100 Greatest, America's 100 Greatest Public, and Best Courses in each state). Our response was that our surveys evaluate architecture, not club operations, and it would be very difficult to ask laymen panelists to evaluate environmental practices in other than superficial terms. In other

words, we weren't going to have panelists start counting bird boxes.

But they persisted, so we asked them what the ASGCA considered to be the single most important environmental issue. "Water use," they said emphatically. We reflected on that and decided it was something our panelists could evaluate, given the right guidance. So we conceived a new definition of Conditioning that has nothing to do with the color green or with the perfection of a lie. Pete, Alice, and other ASGCA members enthusiastically approved. So did *Golf Digest's* course ranking editorial board.

The old definition of Conditioning read: "How would you rate the playing quality of the tees, fairways, and greens on the date you last played the course?"

The new definition reads: "How firm, fast, and rolling were the fairways, and how firm, yet receptive, were the greens on the day you played the course?"

Our new definition makes it easy for a panelist to evaluate Conditioning just on the basis of his or her golf shots on all different types of turfgrasses. It's intended to encourage water conservation by rewarding courses that don't overwater fairways and greens. (Sensible irrigation is the key: Greens shouldn't be thatchy or squishy, but they shouldn't be so rock hard as to be non-receptive, either.)

Our definition also rewards courses with adequate drainage that allows fairways and greens to be playable in a reasonable time after major rainstorms. It is meant to encourage clubs to forgo winter overseeding, if possible. While recognizing some high-volume winter courses need to overseed to avoid fairway divots, we feel dormant turf can

often provide good, firm playing conditions, so our definition rewards courses that avoid purely cosmetic overseeding.

Unlike our old definition, the new one doesn't mention tee boxes. In the past, many panelists scored a course lower if its tee boxes were full of divots. Our editorial position has long been that golfers, not club employees, should replace or fill divots, so it was unfair to penalize a course for the thoughtlessness of its patrons. Likewise, the old emphasis on tees unfairly rewarded courses that received extremely light play and therefore had flawless tee boxes (as well as flawless fairways and spotless greens).

Neither the old nor the new definition ever mentioned rough or bunkers. Our position has always been that rough is meant to be rough, and bunkers are hazards in which no golfer should expect optimum lies.

We circulated this new definition to thousands of golf courses that are candidates for a *Golf Digest* ranking, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Most superintendents and course officials agree that drier turf is usually healthier, less susceptible to diseases, and provides more roll to tee shots and smoother surfaces for putting. They like that it embraces a more frugal British approach to turf management that seems recession-proof. Less water means lower electric bills for high-volume pumps and less fuel for mowers used less often.

We think every course would benefit by adopting our definition as its new standard for course conditioning.

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