

So You Think You Want To Play Championship Conditions All The Time?

Why we can't and, perhaps more important, why we shouldn't.

BY DERF SOLLER

Golfer education is more important today than ever. Golf courses everywhere are facing decreasing budgets and increased scrutiny of product use and water management. Superintendents and course officials are obligated to work within the variable parameters of nature and increased legislation. Allied golf associations need to help golfers understand the amazing commitment of time and resources it takes to provide championship conditions. Numerous factors need to be considered before a course even starts down the "championship conditions" road.

We all love what we see on television. It is important for golfers to realize that for most championship events, a year or more of preparation has been devoted solely for that four- or five-day period, for one week in a given year. The playing and, more important, the maintaining of championship conditions is much more difficult than it looks. It is hard on a course's wallet, and it can be even harder on golfers' egos!

The goal of this article is to explain why conditions required and achieved for championship events are unattainable on a long-term basis for any golf facility. We must consider why trying to attain these conditions may not be in the best interests of many golf courses in the country today.

The Road to Championship Conditions

The road to championship conditions has two paths — one agronomic, dealing with all the aspects of getting a course ready, and a second path, player ability, making conditions appropriate for the skill level of the field. This article is not intended to be a comprehensive review of what is



Growing the game of golf means keeping golf fun for all players.



Daily tasks are accelerated for championship events by adding additional staff for each area of the course.

required to produce championship conditions. It is meant to highlight some of the main reasons why expecting exceptional conditions year-round is an unattainable dream. We cannot blame television; superintendents, club officials, course owners and operators all need to look in the mirror together to understand what is appropriate and prudent for their golf course. Championship conditions take a championship commitment.

The Agronomic Path to Championship Conditions

Course management might partially include:

- Labor and budget considerations
- Irrigation management
- General maintenance practices for:
 - Greens
 - Green surrounds
 - Green approaches
 - Fairways
 - Teeing grounds
 - Roughs
 - Bunkers
 - Course setup

Labor and Budget

Availability and funding of labor is by far one of the biggest requirements to providing championship conditions. Increased conditioning quality is

directly proportional to repetition and increased frequencies of golf course maintenance activities. This includes all areas of the golf course in order to conduct championship events. It is not uncommon to have well in excess of 100 volunteer course maintenance personnel involved in any major championship. Clubs across the country (private and public) can and do conduct their own championships quite successfully. The ability to beef up labor for these special events is accomplished through the creativity of superintendents and their staffs. To expect this kind of dedication and extra effort on a weekly basis throughout the entire golfing season at any locale is where the difficulty lies. Because it supplies labor, budget may be the number-one reason we should not expect to have championship conditions all the time.

Irrigation Management

In order to provide championship conditions at any golf facility for a week or so a year, water management is extremely important and time consuming. Attempting to meet championship goals for green speeds and firmness requires additional efforts toward providing precise and uniform irrigation to putting greens, approaches, fairways, and tees. It is important to understand that these turf areas of a golf course have different water requirements, and thus each must receive separate irrigation practices, which takes labor. Hand watering the putting greens daily during a week-long championship event is a major labor commitment. Scouting and monitoring, and then addressing problem areas as they arise are very time-consuming. Championship-conditioned golf courses are under the watch of many pairs of trained eyes that can help alert the superintendent of turf areas that may decline. This is another component that golf courses simply cannot afford to staff on a year-round basis.

General Maintenance Practices

It is important to understand that all cultural practices are scheduled years in advance to peak the championship



If you are not hand watering, you may be over watering, even on fairways!

golf course for one week in one given summer. Topdressing and fertilizers for all turf areas are applied carefully, and turf growth rates are closely monitored to provide the most consistent playing conditions possible. Pest control and prevention also have been carefully timed for optimum conditions. Plant growth regulator applications, weed control, adding sand to bunkers, etc., have all been completed well in advance of the one championship week.

Putting Greens

Putting green surfaces are finely tuned for championship events at both national championship sites and many local private and public courses. This can be accomplished at most courses, but only for very short periods. Putting green plant fertility is finely tuned for a specific event, and plant growth regulators are commonly used to help maintain consistent playing conditions throughout the day and for the week. Irrigation applications typically are done only by hand to greens, and they are all closely monitored. Topdressing needed for green firmness and providing a smooth putting surface is completed, and firmness and green speeds are established weeks leading up to the event. All this work helps achieve the goal of having the greens in their best consistent condition for the championship.

Approaches and Fairways

Green approach areas receive almost as much maintenance attention as putting surfaces. It is important that shots hitting the approach have an opportunity to bounce forward toward the green and not plug. Improving the playability of approaches requires thatch reduction by core aeration, vertical mowing and regular topdressing to make these areas as firm as putting greens. Fairways also are firmed up. Fairway thatch reduction is an ongoing maintenance program that takes years to correct. Fertilizer applications are planned well in advance and are applied far enough in advance so that consistent, minimal turf growth (and clipping yields) are delivered

during the event week. Divots are filled weeks prior to the event, and plant growth regulators are applied as needed.

Teeing Grounds

Specific teeing grounds (par-3 tee boxes and some short par-4 tees where irons are often played) must often be reserved for a championship and are often taken out of use for

Removal of these screens by anyone other than maintenance staff should be prohibited.

Roughs

Roughs also receive a great deal of extra attention prior to a championship week. Slowly raising the cutting height is just the beginning. Fertility also is planned to provide a longer, wispy rough if possible. Golf carts should be



Simple netting functions as protection for a tee being allowed to recover prior to an event. This practice could be used at any golf course at any time to allow tee recovery.

weeks prior to the event. Although this may not be possible on many golf courses, it may often be attempted to save one tee for an annual event. Mesh covers or other screen-like open materials are often installed to the selected tees to allow the turf to recover. The mesh can be easily removed for maintenance, but it makes it impossible for golfers to use the particular tee during practice rounds or for weeks leading up to the event.

kept out of roughs for weeks prior to events to afford the grass an opportunity to recover and grow in a vertical manner, providing the player with a penalty for missing the fairway on his or her tee shot. Mowing frequency is increased to keep clipping dispersal to a minimum.

Bunkers

Although bunkers are hazards, they do need to be maintained. Championship

bunker preparation usually begins a good year in advance. Sand that needs to be added should be done so plenty of time in advance for it to settle and minimize the chance of plugged lies. This helps provide the most consistent playing medium for the event. (This is often directly related to the sand chosen for bunkers. Utilizing soil laboratories for determining the angularity and shape of sand particles is helpful by predicting the ultimate playing quality when selecting bunker sands.) Daily preparation via hand raking, in conjunction with scarifying bunker bottoms, helps make the bunkers hazards.

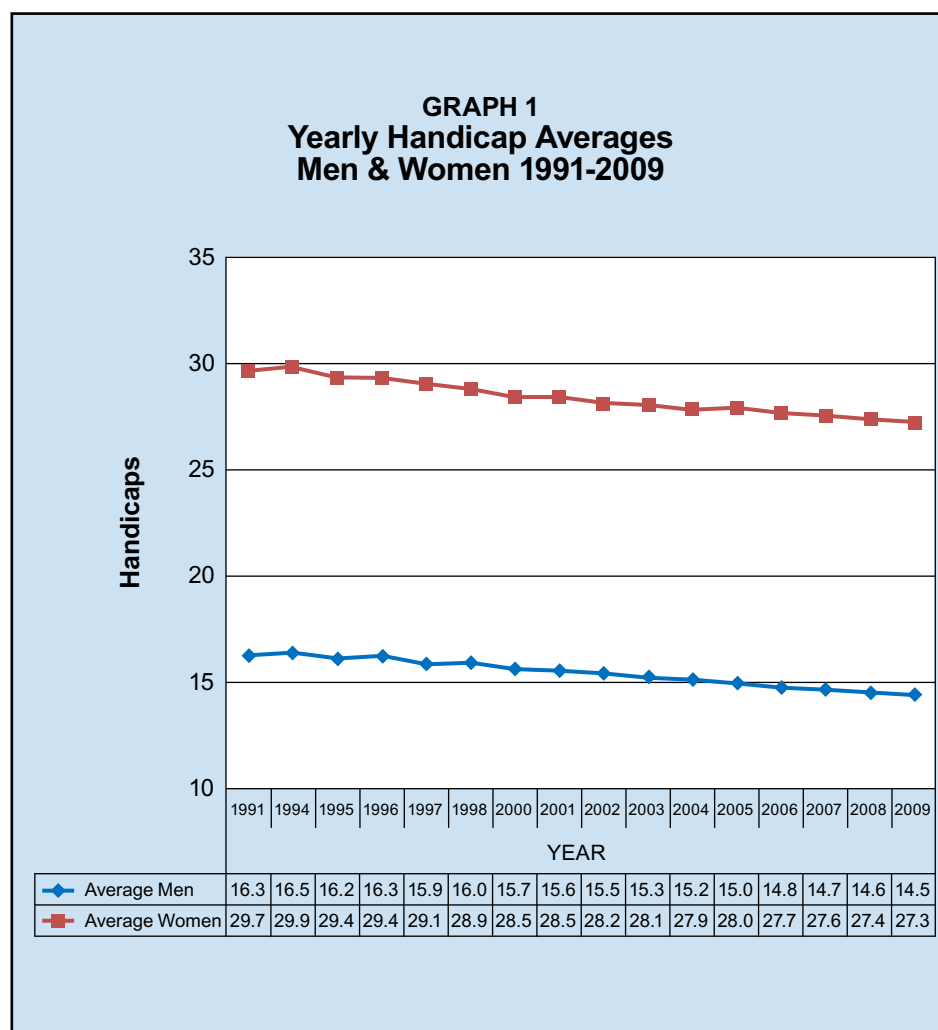
Course Setup

Setting up a golf course for a championship should also be started well in advance. Hole locations and teeing grounds are decided upon well before an event, attempting to utilize course design intent, player ability, and what weather conditions may be like during the event. Thoughtful adjustment to well-laid plans can be made during unforeseen weather or course damage situations. Properly marking water hazards, ground under repair, and course boundaries is a time-consuming task and is an important part of course setup. A properly marked course helps immensely with on-course rulings and the playing of the game of golf.

In highlighting areas that take special effort to prepare for a championship, the reader should realize that a USGA championship or event at a local club is simply that — an event. Championship conditions can be planned for special events, but are not meant to be maintained year-round.

The Player Ability Path to Championship Conditions (Or Why We Shouldn't Want Championship Conditions All the Time)

Knowing what type of golfer (ability level) plays at a specific championship is critical in setting up a course for the event. In the case of USGA national championships, courses are prepared



Since 1991, women golfers have improved more quickly than men, with a handicap index drop of 2.4 strokes compared to the men's of 1.8 strokes!
Source: USGA GHIN.

and set up with only the very best players in mind. Each and every golf facility should take into account its players when preparing for local events, as well. Finding out what level of golfer will be playing may be most easily answered at each golf facility by doing some course homework and analysis. A look at who is actually playing a specific event may give great insight as to how a course should be set up. Reviewing who your golfers are, working as a team (superintendent, head professional, general manager, Green Committee, course operators), and utilizing the tools available (Stimpmeter, TruFirm, moisture meter, weather data, etc.) to determine ideal and realistic conditions for the facility is highly recommended.

Who Are The Golfers by Ability?

Graph 1 shows the average national handicaps of men and women from the USGA GHIN statistics from 1991 through 2009. In 2009 in the United States, the average male handicap was 14.5 and the average female handicap was 27.3. There has been a modest and slight decrease in both men's and women's handicaps over time. Note the similarity in the decrease of handicaps. The average men's handicap has decreased by only 1.8 strokes since in the last 19 years, and the women's handicap average decreased by 2.4 strokes. Most current golfers are not getting that much better very quickly, it seems. Better course conditioning, technology, equipment improvements, golfer skill, strength and

CHART A

WOMEN 2009			
	% Total	% Cumulative	% for Ranges
<+1	0.20	0.20%	0.20%
0	0.11	0.31%	3.29%
1	0.14	0.46%	
2	0.18	0.63%	
3	0.20	0.83%	
4	0.27	1.10%	
5	0.31	1.41%	
6	0.39	1.80%	
7	0.46	2.26%	
8	0.58	2.83%	
9	0.66	3.49%	
10	0.85	4.35%	20.41%
11	1.06	5.41%	
12	1.32	6.73%	
13	1.56	8.28%	
14	1.86	10.15%	
15	2.23	12.38%	
16	2.56	14.93%	
17	2.78	17.71%	
18	2.97	20.68%	
19	3.22	23.91%	
20	3.53	27.44%	39.47%
21	3.65	31.08%	
22	3.91	34.99%	
23	4.08	39.07%	
24	4.17	43.24%	
25	4.23	47.47%	
26	4.19	51.56%	
27	4.03	55.68%	
28	3.95	59.64%	
29	3.74	63.38%	
30	3.62	67.00%	20.97%
31	3.45	70.45%	
32	3.25	73.70%	
33	3.00	76.70%	
34	2.80	79.49%	
35	2.50	81.99%	
36	2.36	84.35%	
37	2.02	86.37%	15.65%
38	1.79	88.16%	
39	1.55	89.71%	
40+	10.29	100.00%	

MEN 2009			
	% Total	% Cumulative	% for Ranges
<+1	0.92	0.92%	0.92%
0	0.68	1.60%	25.32%
1	0.97	2.57%	
2	1.29	3.85%	
3	1.67	5.52%	
4	2.09	7.62%	
5	2.64	10.26%	
6	3.21	13.47%	
7	3.76	17.24%	
8	4.29	21.53%	
9	4.72	26.24%	
10	5.09	31.33%	50.46%
11	5.35	36.68%	
12	5.65	42.33%	
13	5.64	47.97%	
14	5.58	53.55%	
15	5.40	58.94%	
16	5.06	64.01%	
17	4.67	68.68%	
18	4.23	72.91%	
19	3.79	76.70%	
20	3.37	80.08%	19.61%
21	2.96	83.03%	
22	2.65	85.69%	
23	2.32	88.01%	
24	2.02	90.03%	
25	1.72	91.75%	
26	1.47	93.22%	
27	1.21	94.44%	
28	1.02	95.45%	
29	0.86	96.31%	
30	0.70	97.01%	3.69%
31	0.56	97.57%	
32	0.47	98.04%	
33	0.39	98.42%	
34	0.31	98.73%	
35	0.25	98.98%	
36+	1.02	100.00%	

ability have all likely contributed to this slow and steady descent.

Championship conditions on a regular basis do not take into account the ability of the majority of golfers.

It is important to understand the ability levels that most golfers fall into. Chart A contains all the handicap ranges and percent of golfers for each handicap level in 2009. (Go to http://www.usga.org/handicapping/articles_resources/Using-Your-Handicap-Articles---Resources/ to access men's and women's USGA Handicap Index Statistics.) The first percentage column in each chart is the percentage of all golfers at a given handicap level. The second percentage column is a cumulative column representing the percentage of golfers inclusive of all the handicaps up to that handicap level. (Highlighted are the national averages of 14 for men and 27 for women.) For example, 5.58% of male golfers are 14 handicappers. The percentage just to the right (53.55%) is the cumulative total of all male golfers who are 14 handicaps and below.

The right column in the charts shows cumulative totals for handicap ranges. (0-9.9, 10-19.9, 20-29.9, etc.) The 10-19.9 handicap range of male golfers constitutes 50.46%. Almost 40% of women golfers are in the 20-29.9 handicap range. These statistics represent a snapshot in time as of January of 2010 of the national averages. Certainly the handicap level percentage numbers will vary from course to course and throughout any given year, but it might be an important consideration that all facilities conduct such an analysis to determine who their golfers are. Championship conditions on a regular basis do not take into account the ability of the majority of golfers. But do these percentages tell the whole story? Is there a difference between numbers of golfers found through the handicap levels compared with who is actually playing and posting rounds?

Who Is Actually Playing Golf? What Handicap Levels Are Posting Scores?

Chart B contains the information of who is playing and posting scores for each of the handicap ranges. It is interesting to see that the percentage of men golfers closely mirrors the percentages of their handicaps as far as who is playing and posting rounds. The women are posting more rounds in slightly higher handicap ranges. These observations of who is actually playing and posting rounds should support the need to evaluate and address each course's ideal and realistic playing conditions for its golfers.

The handicap range seems to closely mirror who is actually playing. Producing playing conditions to meet the majority of golfers should be a primary focus and concern. According to a recent National Golf Foundation study, only 26% of golfers regularly break 90, and only 5% break 80. Many times, attempting to achieve championship conditions, even for an individual course event, may leave many of your players out of their element.

Conclusion

Championship conditions cannot be maintained for more than short periods of time. It is hoped that this brief overview of the efforts needed to do so will help golfers understand why this is simply not a realistic request. As this article also points out, golfer numbers and abilities would lend one to believe that championship conditions might not be well received at the majority of courses. There are a limited number of golf courses across the country whose clientele expect challenging conditions. These clubs have a high percentage of lower-handicap players, and this is the goal and mission statement at such clubs. These clubs also have the resources and the commitment to attempt to achieve challenging playing conditions on a regular basis. But even they can't pull it off on a long term. The majority of golf facilities, however, should reconsider before heading down the championship condition road.

CHART B

2009 Women's Handicap Ranges	% Women per Range	Rounds Posted per Range	% Rounds per Range
< 0	0.3	12755	0.18
0 - 9.9	3.6	345179	4.89
10 - 19.9	22.4	2166559	30.70
20 - 29.9	42.4	3075586	43.58
30 - 36.4	31.3	1456559	20.64
Totals	100%	7056638	100%

Percentage of women golfers per handicap range and the number of rounds they posted through USGA GHIN for 2009.

2009 Men's Handicap Ranges	% Men per Range	Rounds Posted per Range	% Rounds per Range
< 0	1.1	308085	0.97
0 - 9.9	27.1	10344421	32.51
10 - 19.9	50.1	16198227	50.91
20 - 29.9	18.8	4459008	14.01
30 - 36.4	2.9	507789	1.60
Totals	100%	31817530	100%

Percentage of men golfers per handicap range and the number of rounds they posted through USGA GHIN for 2009.



Graduated roughs for championships requires multiple pieces of equipment, extra labor, good agronomics, and NO golf cart traffic for weeks leading up to the events.



Championship conditions (and courses!) may be too much for most golfers.

Thick, tall rough, low heights of cut on fairways and greens (championship conditions) only truly challenge the lower-handicap players. They are mostly penal for a majority of golfers. Fast greens are not just about putting. Fast greens on a day-to-day basis cause slow play and loss of hole locations. It is well documented that low mowing heights, frequent grooming, excessive rolling, and decreased fertility all can lead to physiological stress to turf. This can increase disease activity and diminish putting surface reliability. All of this for just a few golfers?

Extremely tight fairway lies also provide conditions that favor a minority of the golfing population. Slightly raising heights of cut in fairways appeals to a broader base of golfers and should help decrease disease pressure and help improve general overall turf health. All turfgrasses used in golf have optimum mowing height ranges where the plant is healthiest and most efficient in its growth. Superintendents have increasingly been pressured to lower mowing heights. Reduced mowing heights and increased mowing frequency enhance playing conditions but stress turfgrass agronomics. This

is another key reason why providing championship conditions should be produced only for limited periods.

Costs, agronomics, and the reality of who the playing golfers are make it reasonably clear why it is impossible to try to deliver championship conditions on a regular basis. It has been difficult for years to explain this to golfers, but we need to continue. As superintendents try to produce these conditions on a long-term basis, the best interests of their golf course are not being considered. This article has not been written to dissuade clubs from attempting to achieve great playing conditions — but just the opposite. A major goal of the Green Section Agronomists from across the country is to help each course be the best it can within its budget. That is our commitment when we visit golf courses during a Turf Advisory Service (TAS) appointment.

It is hoped that each golfer and course take a look at his or her facility. They should understand the clientele, gather as a working group, utilize the tools available for identifying proper green speeds, and establish fairway heights of cut, length of rough, bunker playability, etc., and develop a realistic

course maintenance standard. This should help provide years of enjoyment and encourage the growth of the game of golf. Golf and fun should be forever linked. Leave the championship conditions to the best players.

Additional Resources

Gross, Pat. 2010. Turn off your TV and look in the mirror. *USGA Green Section Record*. 48(1): p.36.

Moore, James F. 1998. How to select the best sand for your bunkers. *USGA Green Section Record*. 36(1): p.9-12.

2009. National Golf Foundation Consumer Profile.

Nelson, Matt, and L. Gilhuly. 2006. Where is green speed taking the game? *USGA Green Section Record*. 41(2): p. 34-37.

Shearman, Robert C. 1989. Physiology of turfgrass mowing. *Golf Course Management*. 57(2): p. 23, 26, 28, 30.

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