

# THE STIMPMETER ISN'T EVERYTHING

by

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**“Good putters putt well on good greens”**

*Rosalind Windows, Handicap 4, Past Captain Northumberland Ladies*

*(and Richards Mum)*

All we golfers want from our greens is the chance to shine. Whether for birdie, bogey or even worse it always helps if we sink the putt. The punch of the air or the smile of relief both mean that we are in the game. The greens need to be good for us to enjoy the day.

The average club golfer tends to judge the performance and quality of the greens on their speed. The speed is also used to compare the standard of one course against another. This is probably because the Stimpmeter provides us with an easy measure of green speed (in feet of ball roll). The number is easy to determine and understand. The true golfer, however, will judge the quality of the greens on more than just a flat measure of ball roll.

Ideal greens are a combination of the qualities of firmness, smoothness and trueness. With the correct (and consistent) blend of these factors the surface is receptive, it takes and releases the ball, which then rolls out under its own weight without too much “chatter”. The player can gauge the character of the green, read the situation clearly and be rewarded for skilful play. Skilled turf professionals concentrate on creating firm, true and smooth surfaces rather than focusing on increasing the speed. We aim to achieve these qualities throughout the year rather than just during the summer.

A good golf green should be firm (not hard) and receptive to a well-struck approach shot. The ball should impact the surface, bounce forward, hold and then release. The turf should recover after impact with minimal pitch marking. We fulfil this aim

primarily by controlling organic matter accumulation at the turf base. Aeration and regular top dressing are necessary to keep the turf base from becoming unduly soft.

To help quantify the firmness of putting surfaces, The R&A's Director of Research and Testing, Dr. Steve Otto has defined surface firmness in terms of "Resilience", "Stiffness" and "Penetration" (!). With specialist equipment these elements can be measured, analysed and objectively judged. Such measurements are still in their early stages but usable numbers would add to our understanding and perception about what makes a green good and they could help guide the maintenance objectives.

Smoothness and trueness are the two other key qualities. On a smooth and true green, the ball will hold its line, take the break, roll and finish-out freely. The R&A has also funded the development of a machine (at STRI working with Sheffield Hallam University) that can quantify surface smoothness and trueness. A measure of trueness is also useful for benchmarking and to help us measure progress. In the UK we have the governing body and the brains who live for golf and they want us to optimise playing quality to reward real skill rather than just straight target play.

Firm, smooth and true surfaces can be achieved in a number of ways but delivering them in a sustainable manner might involve the promotion of the fine fescue and bentgrass species within the sward. Bent and/or fescue dominance brings improvement in the playing qualities without the innate disease and drought susceptibility of the currently dominant annual meadow grass. We achieve the finer grasses by careful and attentive greenkeeping. Check out The R&A's website [www.bestcourseforgolf.org](http://www.bestcourseforgolf.org) and "The Disturbance Theory" articles at [www.stri.co.uk](http://www.stri.co.uk) for technical insight.

Greenkeeping is a skilled profession and we have a long history of learning behind us to help us create these ideal surfaces. The main problem tends to be that golfers don't really appreciate what it takes to make real quality putting surfaces. The demand for speed can lead to missing the more essential playing qualities. Your club needs to agree the desired putting surface playing quality objectives and then support the greenkeeper to achieve them. Take advice if you need to and bear in mind that STRI agronomists have principles and we don't compromise on the long-term development

of playing quality. You will need to commit to your greens by resourcing the effort properly and making time for the necessary work to be done.

The Stimpmeter is an easy measure of green speed but it can be a destructive tool if it is being used as the sole measure of success. It can make you turn away from the greater good. Thankfully better measurement tools are on the way. Good Turf Professionals place their emphasis on the high virtues of firmness, smoothness and trueness to create genuine putting surfaces where the ideal speed is a consequence. These qualities can be sustainable throughout the year if managed correctly. What kind of greens do you want?

Richard and Henry are advisory agronomists at the Sports Turf Research Institute, Bingley and they are here to help. They may be contacted by email at [info@stri.co.uk](mailto:info@stri.co.uk) for feedback (Subject: Turf Advice).