

# CHALKBOARD

## TIPS FROM THE PROS

### PRACTICE TEES

By Douglas T. Hawes, Ph.D.

Few golf courses have a 17-acre, circular practice tee and range like the Muirfield Village Golf Club outside of Columbus, OH. Most courses have trouble coming up with a range 320 yards long, let alone one 320 yards in diameter with a tee surface completely around the circumference. However, with careful planning, good construction and wise use, better practice tees (driving ranges) are possible even within the small framework of most golf courses.

First, keep the entire practice tee surface on one level if possible. Whenever a level is added, valuable space is lost on slopes between the levels. Such slopes are also a maintenance problem. Exceptions are the bi-level tees found at Industry Hills, CA, and similar ones in Japan.

Controlling the use of the tee surface is critical to turf maintenance. Play needs to be mixed each day so the whole practice area is used. Roped off areas and movable bag racks appear to work best in moving play around the tee surface. Ropes are laid on the ground in a long thin rectangle to mark the area to hit from each day. In some cases heavy use and restricted space make grass survival impossible.

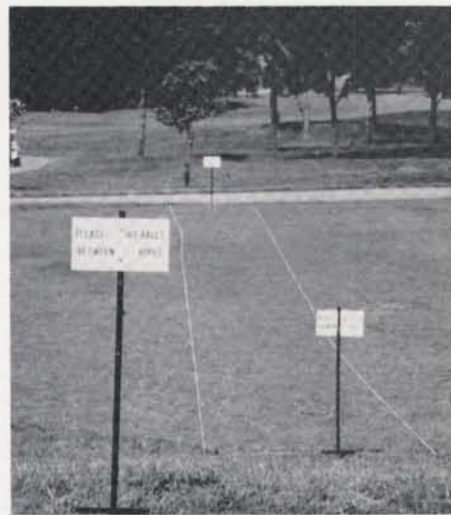
Proper construction is very important. In addition to having the teeing surface on one level, constructing the tee with little or no elevation gives the maximum usable surface. The more elevated the tee, the more area is lost along the edges. The turf must be smooth. An elevated tee is also subject to greater settling as time passes.

I've seen some tees built at, or near, USGA specifications for greens. Whether this is an improvement or not is uncertain, but the important factor is building a tee with good surface drainage. If the range slopes downhill away from the player, then slope the tee downhill (or the opposite if the slope is uphill). A grade of two to four percent appears level to most golfers providing it slopes the same way as the surrounding land.

A tee must have a well-planned irrigation system to keep part of the surface in use while the rest is under repair. The tee should be zoned into front, middle and back irrigated areas. Four zones are better yet. While the zone being used that week is dry and firm, another zone can be aerified, seeded, fertilized and topdressed, while the third zone can be kept moist to encourage seed germination and growth. A fourth zone allows more time in the rotation for recovery.



Practice tee at Souris Valley Golf Course in Minot, ND.



Tee roped off to control wear.

Once the practice tee is zoned, it is possible to put it on a weekly maintenance schedule. Each week, one zone receives aerification or topdressing, overseeding or sodding, or fertilization and lots of water if needed. The key to success is adhering to the weekly maintenance schedule. The exact maintenance needs depend on the grass species, on the tee, and on the time of year.

The sprinklers used for the zones should be small and triangulated. The smallest practical head should be used; nothing larger than the Toro 634 at a 60-foot triangular spacing. Each zone would thus be 52 feet deep. The heads within each zone need to occupy separate locations on the time clock.

Three such zones 300 feet long and 50 plus feet deep should be more than adequate for most 18 hole golf courses. Some

heavily played municipal courses with lighted driving ranges need more teeing surface.

Another trick to increase the amount of usable practice tee is to construct another tee at the far end of the range. Golfers end up hitting golf balls at each other, but if the practice area is long enough there is no problem. In case of a strong wind from behind, players at one end may be restricted to teeing with short irons. Where ranges are short, country clubs can restrict forward portions of the tee to irons.

The grass species will vary between the northern and southern parts of the U.S., but not as much as one might imagine. Perennial ryegrass, the standard on northern tees, is used for winter play on southern courses. Perennial ryegrass's ability to germinate quickly and take abuse even as a seedling make it an obvious first choice for overseeding tees.

Some northern golf courses do have Kentucky bluegrass and bentgrass practice tees, more of the former than the latter. Kentucky bluegrass sod is very economical in certain areas making resodding feasible. In the South, bermudagrass cultivars surface 99 percent of practice tees in the summer.

Weed control is a problem due to constant divots and the desire to reseed. On northern tees the use of Tupersan (siduron) at low rates allows reasonable control of crabgrass, while still allowing overseeding to perennial ryegrass. On bermudagrass, early spring applications of most preemergents will allow perennial ryegrass overseeding in the fall.

*Editor's Note: Douglas Hawes is a certified professional agronomist specializing in golf course maintenance consulting. He is based in Plano, TX.*