

Not So Soft Spikes

I'm usually a big proponent of technology, of adopting new equipment and ideas to make golf better. However, we need to reconsider one of the most significant changes of the past few decades in light of evidence that is most obvious to us, green superintendents.

It may be time to take a hard line against soft spikes.

About 20 years ago, there was a major revolution in golf. The 6- to 8-mm metal spike was replaced by the plastic "soft spike" following an uproar about the damage that metal spikes were doing to turfgrass, particularly putting greens.

Fast forward to today and take a look at the bottom of golf shoes. Actually, if you're a superintendent, you don't have to examine the shoes themselves: Walk on any green and you'll easily see how spike technology has changed. These "soft" spikes are getting longer, sharper, wider, and more aggressive, so as a result, they are inflicting more and more damage on our courses.

The same week that the golf industry was convening—and showing off a host of new shoe styles—at the PGA Show in Florida, I conducted a random survey of superintendents, asking them how plastic spikes have affected them. While the shoe manufacturers were introducing soles with more spikes and other "points of contact" (POCs) designed to give golfers better traction and stability, I received these comments from some of our brethren, who are responsible for providing golfers with the best possible playing conditions. Their responses were eye-opening.

"It is no secret that golf has been on the decline for the last 5+ years, yet the demand for conditioning, with fast and firm greens, has increased," wrote one superintendent. "Why do shoe manufactures continue to produce shoes that do everything to frustrate other golfers and those that are employed to provide the conditions? The firmest, driest greens do not withstand a foursome of golfers wearing these types of spikes. The scuffing, unintentional scuffing, and twisting of turf, especially around the cup, ruins the putting surface for every golfer that follows."

Said another of you: "The shoe manufacturers actually ruined a great idea. Now the greens are getting more damage, more at times it would seem than with the old metal spikes. I know that when I challenge a shoe company our pro gets nervous. I could care less! I am worried about the grass."

"I've noticed as golf shoes become more athletic in design, the damage they cause to turf has increased," someone told me. "Some of the newer spikes are so aggressive—long, tall, robust—we are seeing scuff marks and scars on the greens. Rather than pressing into the turf, these new spikes seem to grab and hold onto the turf, causing more shearing and tearing of low-cut grass. When feet twist and turn, it's almost as if the spikes are 'reverse ball repair tools.'"

Referring to a popular brand of shoe, one superintendent said, “The spikes on these shoes look like the talons on a bird of prey and they are just as sharp. The material is an extremely hard plastic/polymer, with just standing on bentgrass or ultradwarf putting surfaces with these multiple prongs will leave a mark/indentation. Most people do not know how to walk on a putting surface in golf shoes. I believe the damage from dragging/twisting/shuffling their feet is worse than even the old metal spikes.”

You can quickly see the main themes in these comments, which were repeated in the many others I received: the new spikes are doing more damage at a time that golf is already in trouble, and that damage is at least as bad as what metal spikes used to do.

Look at the numbers. Shoes used to have 8 or 9 metal spikes. Now shoes have 6 to 12 “spikes” each with 5 or so prongs, plus dozens, sometimes hundreds more points of contact of various sizes, depths, and sharpness. Each golfer wears two shoes, four golfers in a group, another group every 10 minutes or so. Adidas has a new shoe with 18 spikes, each of those spikes has 5 POCs, so that’s 180 impressions from each golfer with every step. And how many steps does the average golfer take on the green? Dozens.

And how many golfers do you see each day who weigh more than 250 pounds? And golfers dragging their feet, jumping up and down whether they miss or make the putt, scuffing, kicking, and otherwise tearing up the turf. Of course, it’s all worst right around the hole where every golfer steps over and over again.

No wonder our greens—which golfers want kept fast, slick, and in perfect condition—look like a close-up of the moon. And then they blame us for not taking better care of the course.

There are other issues, too.

This extra damage increases maintenance costs—chemicals, top-dressing sand, and additional staff to maintain turf quality. Depending on the region and the weather, the damage can be exaggerated when it’s wet (in the Northwest), hot (stressed turf in the northeast and central states), and on dormant grass (Southeast, Florida). Early and late in the season, growth can be severely compromised by damage to the plant.

Plastic spikes with multiple prongs have another problem, picking up rocks and mulch, dragging them onto the green where they can dent and ding cutting reels and bedknives. Mower damage also results when these spikes come free of the shoes, which they often do.