

# The Metallic Mashers of Monocots: Golf Spikes!

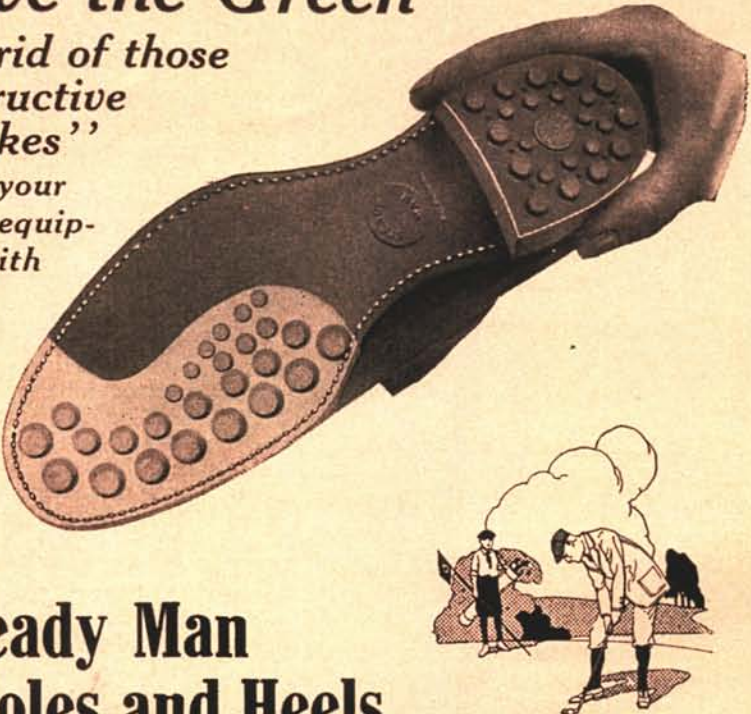
*Love 'em  
or hate 'em,  
spikeless  
alternatives  
are here  
to stay.*

by LARRY GILHULY

IT IS ONE of the most common signs found at any golf course. It usually is hung outside the entrance to the clubhouse or when entering the dining area. It is simple. It is definitely to the point. It states, "NO SPIKES ALLOWED!" The reason is obvious, since we all know the damage metal spikes can cause to carpets and wood flooring. Then why, when spikeless alternatives are introduced to address the same issue on the golf course, do so many people passionately resist the concept? Why do so many others feel exactly the opposite?

## Save the Green

*Get rid of those destructive "spikes"*  
*Have your shoes equipped with*



## Steady Man Soles and Heels

of sturdy rubber—the raised rubber studs give you the firm stance you need. No occasion to change shoes for luncheon or between games. Steady Man Soles and Heels do not disfigure rugs or floor, nor tear the turf or green.

*Ask your club "Pro" about them, and at high grade stores. Or, send us the outline of your shoe on a piece of paper, and your check for \$1.50, and we'll supply you direct.*

**THE STEDMAN PRODUCTS COMPANY**  
South Braintree, Massachusetts

*The spike damage issue has been around much longer than people realize. This ad appeared in the June 1921 issue of Golf Illustrated.*

A wise man once said, "Every old idea was a new idea at one time." Let's look at this *new* idea and discuss the positives and negatives of golf spikes and spikeless alternatives.

### **Spikeless Golf — A New or Old Idea?**

Until the late 1800s, golf spikes or protrusions on the bottom of shoes were not even used. They were still a novelty when an event occurred in 1914 that has gone down in history as one of the worst calamities for grass growers.

The flamboyant Walter Hagen won the U.S. Open that year in hobnail shoes! Thus, the metallic mashers of monocots were born, and a very willing public followed their heroes, believing that they, too, needed the extra traction offered by these wondrous devices.

The USGA began studying the issue as far back as 1958. Dr. Marvin Ferguson, then research coordinator for the USGA Green Section, found that the conventional golf spike not only caused severe damage to the turf, but soil compaction and delayed recovery were additional problems

when compared with the effects of other shoes.

In 1982, studded shoes were reintroduced, having been tried during the 1920s; however, during wet conditions, golf course superintendents reported significant disturbance to putting surfaces from them. For this reason, Golf Shoe Study II was conducted by the Green Section to compare traditional spiked shoes to studded shoes. The results from this study again demonstrated that shoes with golf spikes were the most damaging during both wet and dry conditions. It further proved that golf spikes DO NOT help aerate the putting surface. They do exactly the opposite!

With the introduction of replaceable spikeless alternatives in the early 1990s, one study offered additional insight. At Ohio State University, researchers found that when compared to traditional metal spikes, golf balls rolled significantly farther and truer on dry plots where spikeless alternatives were used. There was also a *striking difference* between the spikeless and metal spiked treatments. The metal-spiked plots were *literally chewed up* after the 10-minute walking session. The spikeless plots looked healthy and could barely be distinguished from the control plots.

So, do you need additional evidence that golf spikes are bad for turf? Ponder these numbers. The average golf shoe has 11 spikes. The average number of paces taken on a green is 52. Therefore, each golfer leaves 572 ( $52 \times 11$ ) individual spike marks on every green. In one 18-hole round of golf, a single player will leave behind 10,296 spike marks. If the course receives 200 rounds of play, the total number of spike marks reaches 2,059,200 for one day! If the course averages 200 rounds every day for a month, the total reaches a staggering 61,776,000! Multiply this by 12 months (741,312,000!) and you can now see why putts are commonly missed and why golf course superintendents hate the damage caused by these instruments of destruction.

### The Trouble With Golf Spikes

We have seen that golf spikes do cause considerable damage to putting surfaces. The problem with golf spikes, however, extends well beyond the documented research previously outlined. It includes one of the Rules of Golf, several parts of the golf course maintenance operation that do not involve the greens, and areas of the

entire operation that significantly influence the bottom line. Consider the following:

1. Rule 16-1a. This Rule describes the circumstances under which a player is allowed to touch the line of a putt. Noticeably absent from the options is the ability to tap down spike marks. While the majority of players wish for a Rule change, apparently it will not happen in the near future. In reality, spike marks are addressed in The Rules of Golf in Section 1 under Etiquette. It states in the *Care of the Course* subsection, "On completion of the hole by all players in the group, damage to the putting green caused by golf shoe spikes should be repaired." As with ball marks, the player needs to participate in course maintenance by repairing spike marks, too.

2. Damage to concentrated traffic zones around tees and greens. Everyone is familiar with the paths that can be created by players funneling around a bunker or near a tee. The time spent diverting traffic, overseeding, sodding, topdressing, and aerifying means that other maintenance operations suffer.

3. Damage to teeing surfaces. Divots are bad enough, so why compound problems by allowing players to grind millions of metallic spikes into the teeing surfaces?

4. Clubhouse floor damage. The wear and tear on clubhouse and pro shop carpeting is another problem with golf spikes. Significant yearly savings could be realized by eliminating these floor destroyers.

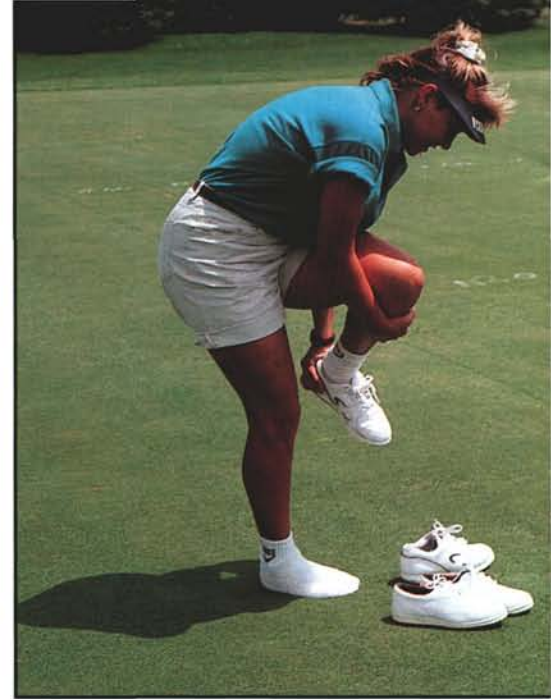
5. Damage to golf carts. Floor mats and the inside of power carts receive far less abuse when metal is removed from the bottom of players' feet.

6. Damage to cart paths. Significant wear occurs on asphalt paths in a short period of time. Concrete paths also can become worn; however, the real danger with concrete is the tendency to slip or catch a spike, thereby causing injury.

7. Damage to wooden bridges and ties. Golf spikes rapidly wear out these surfaces and a rubber mat cover is usually required to protect the wood.

8. Damage to artificial mats. Spikes rapidly wear out these expensive products, with the most abuse found at the practice tee.

9. Damage to mowing equipment. Ever see what a metal spike does to a finely tuned green, tee, or fairway mower? Given that the slightest nick can cause significant damage to mow-



ing equipment and playing quality, a loose spike is like a land mine awaiting detonation.

The trouble with golf spikes is that they damage virtually every portion of a golf course. They significantly disrupt the putting surfaces, do untold damage to carpeting and floors, and are the mechanics' worst nightmare.

With all of this going against it, why does this seemingly insignificant piece of metal have so many avid disciples? Read on; however, you may not like the answers!

### Five Fallacies Facing the Future

During the late 1980s, the spikeless alternative movement gained momentum in Boise, Idaho. Ernie Deacon, general manager at the Warm Springs Golf Course, faced the problem of damaged greens during the winter when spikes were allowed on frozen greens. After spikes were banned, the players rightfully complained about slipping when playing in tennis shoes on frozen turf. What to do? How about a spikeless alternative that would give acceptable traction and not crush the crown of the plant? With this idea, an alternative to spiked golf shoes was born. Everyone would immediately switch and life would be good for all players and golf course superintendents. Right? Wrong!

Why is it that so many players still are not convinced about the positive value of spikeless alternatives? While many simply have not become edu-



*Penn State University currently is studying the effects of alternative versus conventional spikes.*

cated on the subject, many golfers do not even want to talk about this subject with an open mind. Here are five observations that may help answer this question.

1. Safety issues. This is the big one! Many players are convinced that the spikeless alternatives are dangerous, even during dry conditions. If this were the case, why would more than 400 golf clubs, numerous golf associations, and several hundred thousand players eliminate golf spikes from their courses, tournaments, and feet? As noted trial lawyer and USGA Green Section committeeman Bo Links states, "There is no shoe that is completely slip-proof. You need to be careful walking down a hill in wet conditions, but spikes don't guarantee that you won't slip, either. Because of the many positives achieved by eliminating spikes, this is a compromise position that makes sense."

So is there a safety issue? There is if you are not thinking while you are walking down a wet hill or on a slippery wood walkway. So, avoid solid surfaces that could cause slippage. When you must walk on one of these surfaces, take small steps with complete foot contact. When going down an inclined turf area, plant the forward portion of the foot first to establish complete contact with the entire shoe. A fellow golfer was overheard recently, and he truly put this issue in perspective. He stated, "I've worn my spikeless shoes all winter long on a hilly golf

course during one of the wettest winters and springs on record. It actually made me swing easier and, most important, *it made me aware of how to walk properly on a golf course.* In spikes, I probably would have slipped and fallen several times because of the mistaken belief that I was safe."

2. Traction during the swing. It is true that spikeless alternatives are not for everyone. They can be especially troublesome for those with a tendency to flail at the ball. The fact of the matter is that most players who have tried spikeless alternatives report a minimal loss of traction, even in wet conditions. If a player is consistently slipping, he should contact his local PGA professional for a lesson in balance.

3. Tradition. It has been interesting to read the many editorials and articles on this subject during the past several years. On the pro-spike side, the most outrageous editorial supported the need to hear the metallic click of spikes as the player walks on a hard surface. Tradition was the main reason cited. Since golf spikes have really only been popular during the past 82 years and golf was played spikeless before the time that Columbus sailed the ocean blue, it is agreed that tradition should prevail. That tradition is spikeless!

4. Closed-minded touring professionals. There have been more uninformed and outright incorrect comments from this group than any other one regarding this topic. Some have called spikeless alternatives *dangerous* without even trying them, and others turn up their noses as if they are downwind from a cattle yard. Perhaps the staggering sums of money available on the Tour offer some justification for their viewpoint, but why do they often state that spikeless alternatives cause the greens actually to be less smooth than greens played with spikes? Granted, this can happen with some types of shoes when the greens are overly wet; however, this problem is non-existent on firm putting surfaces.

Fortunately, there are a few shining lights who have given spikeless alternatives an open try and found them to their liking. Two-time U.S. Open winner Andy North has been spikeless for two years, and Raymond Floyd completed the 1996 Masters without leaving a single spike mark on the greens. Both have mentioned significantly improved comfort without traction problems. Others, too, are beginning to see the light; unfortunately, it

may be a long time before we hear the pros stop complaining about spike marks costing them yet another tournament title.

5. Closed-minded club professionals. As with the touring pros, there has been a reluctance on the part of some club professionals in embracing spikeless alternatives. While the touring pros may determine trends in golf equipment based upon their play, it is the local PGA pro who can make or break this idea. At every course we have viewed during the past several years where spikes have been either banned or discouraged, it is the golf course professional working hand-in-hand with the golf course superintendent who has made the difference. As Walter Mattison, CGCS at Widgi Creek Golf Club, in Oregon, recently stated, "Many of the membership resisted the idea, but once they saw the results, they came around. Our Director of Golf, Walt Porterfield, took a strong stance, backed it up, and was the absolute key to the successful implementation of our policy that bans metal spikes." Now that is the mark of an open mind and a true professional!

### **The Present and Future of Spikeless Alternatives**

When spikeless alternatives were introduced in the early 1990s, they didn't even make a scratch in the spike production market. From humble beginnings with 500,000 pairs of spikeless shoes produced in 1993, the numbers have steadily risen to more than 6 million in 1994 and 20 million in 1995. With several models currently available on the market, what makes these spikeless alternatives so attractive? Are there any negatives besides those previously mentioned? Yes, there are, but as you will see, the positives far outweigh the negatives. Let's explore the most-asked questions about these monocot massagers.

1. Do they eliminate spike marks? Absolutely! They are especially effective on bentgrass greens; however, Eugene Country Club, smack dab in the middle of *Poa annua* country, recently became the second golf course in Oregon to place a ban on spikes. When asked why the club decided to make this stand, golf course superintendent Chris Gaughan put it very simply, "There was a tremendous difference between the *Poa annua*-dominated greens before and after the ban on golf spikes. Spike marks were not the issue. Quite simply, the greens were

smoother. The players who played in the late afternoon really appreciated having the same course as those who play in the morning.”

2. Do spikeless alternatives halt *Poa annua* invasion? No, they don't; however, by eliminating spikes, bentgrass greens are healthier and can better resist *Poa annua* encroachment. Realistically, this is an area that requires more research before claims can be made.

3. Are they more comfortable? Forgetting for a moment the superintendents' glee with the introduction of this concept, the most common positive comment we hear comes from players concerning how comfortable they are during and after a round of golf. For this reason, many older players or those with joint and leg problems find these alternatives especially soothing.

4. Should they be used during the winter? That is exactly why they were invented! In areas of high rainfall and warmer winter temperatures, the option of spiked or spikeless shoes should be determined by the terrain and those in charge. As mentioned earlier, just use common sense when walking and your backside will remain as clean as your frontside.

5. Do they minimize damage to non-turf areas? Put it this way: If you can eliminate a hard, metallic object from contact with a material that is softer, don't you think the softer object would last longer? That is why carpets, wood floors, cart paths, bridges, tee markers, wooden steps, benches, and artificial practice mats last longer when golf spikes are eliminated.

6. Do they last as long as metal spikes? Although there are spikeless alternatives that will last as long, this is one major drawback to the non-metallic alternatives. Experience has shown that some brands may last fewer than 15 rounds, while others continue to perform well beyond 30. The cost to the player may be higher, but the cost to the course is significantly lower.

7. Are they convenient to use? They are if you like the idea of finishing a round, walking into the 19th hole, going into the dining room for lunch, and then driving home without changing shoes!

8. Are they less damaging to new greens? If you want to open your course before adequate organic mat has developed, spikeless alternatives can offer an opening of four to six weeks sooner than the normal six-month waiting period for bentgrass greens.

9. Are they needed on bermudagrass greens? Although the results may not be as noticeable, it will help. Besides, aren't there enough other non-turf advantages to this program for every golf course?

10. Do they allow the superintendent to use fewer chemicals? More research is needed in this area, but if the greens receive less damage, then it is logical to assume that the healthier grass will resist disease, insects, and weeds.

11. How can we get started? This is perhaps the toughest question. Experience has shown that you must have the following key people on board before embarking upon your journey:

Golf course superintendent

Director of golf or head professional  
Green chairman and the committee,  
if applicable

President and board of directors,  
if applicable

Men's and ladies' club representatives

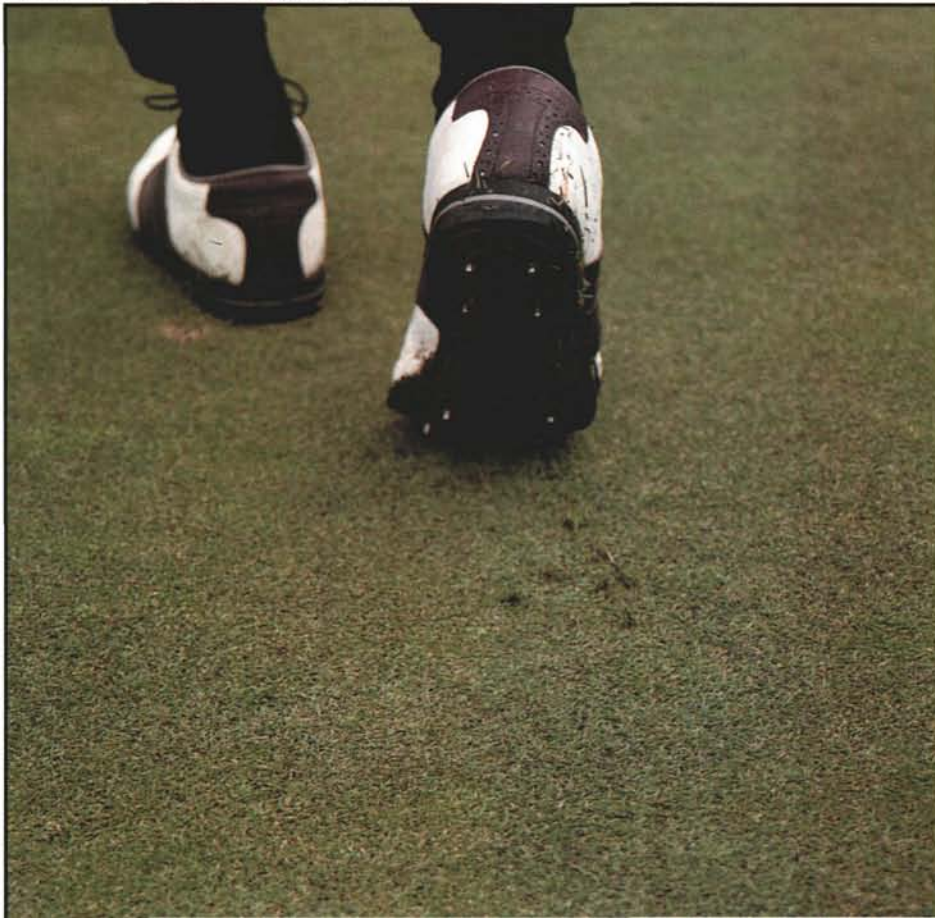
Once these key players see the validity of this concept, an educational program must be started. Newsletters, fliers, notices posted in the locker rooms, and word-of-mouth should help educate players about the damage caused by spikes. Then, host a spikeless tournament for one day to see the difference up close and personal. If the field is very large, an even better approach is to play the course spikeless with a shotgun in the morning. For the afternoon, play with spikes only. After each round is completed, send the decision makers around the course to view the difference between spikes and no spikes. It will be noticeable!

The next step is to provide a trial period when spikes are eliminated. This can last from two to four weeks before a final decision is made. Depending upon your location, a year-round or growing-season ban will make a substantial difference in many areas at your golf course.

### **It's All Up To You!**

Are spikeless alternatives in your future, or are they a passing fad for the feet? If what has happened in the first half of the '90s is any indication, they are here to stay and will only get better with time. Just think, someday we could all get together and laugh about the old days when we were crazy enough to wear the metallic mashers of monocots!

*The metallic mashers caught in the act.*



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