More play equals more pressure to top-dress

BY PETER BLAIS

The growth of golf has meant more play, more pressure on greens and thus the need for more frequent top dressing.

There are many benefits to top dressing, a technique employed since the 1800s, but used more frequently in the past 10 years as the game's popularity has grown, according to Jim Connolly, Northeast region agronomist with the United States Golf Association Green Section. They include:

• Providing a smoother putting surface. Golfer traffic causes many imperfections over the course of the season. The average 5,000-square-foot green requires one-third of a yard regular application every two to three weeks during the growing season can yield a more uniform putting surface.

• Filling up aerification holes. Left unfilled, air spaces can develop as the holes fill in naturally and dimples form on the green. Top dressing fills the holes and levels the putting surface.

• Improving soil quality. A clay soil that compacts easily can be improved by light, frequent top dressings of a sandier material. Over two years, one to two inches of improved top soil can be laid down over the natural clay, rebuilding the soil from the top down.

• Protecting grass from winter kill. A late-season top dressing can distribute heavier amounts after aerification.

The trouble is, not all courses can afford it. Connolly estimates half the courses in the Northeast have at least two machines. That means the other half don't.

"Unfortunately, the more expensive machines are what the less wealthy clubs need. The big machines replace labor. It's the nine-hole courses with no money that should have the most expensive equipment." Waterville (Maine) Country Club superintendent Kyle Evans' situation is more the norm. Evans has a Vicon spreader he uses primarily for light applications and a Cushman unit for heavier ones.

"There's no excuse not to top dress at least three to four times a year, unless you can't afford the machinery or just have one or two people working on the golf course," said the USGA representative.

"Unfortunately, the more expensive machines are what the less wealthy clubs need. The big machines replace labor. It's a real battle. Of all the functions a superintendent does, this is the one that ties up the golf course. It can be a real deterrent, unless the superintendent is given that window of time to perform the job. Golfers must realize they're cutting their own throats without it."

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