Seeking aerification, three clubs pool resources

By PETER BLAIS

FALMOUTH, Maine — In a novel display of Yankee ingenuity and cooperation, three private Maine clubs have agreed to share the cost of a fairway aerifier none could have afforded separately.

Superintendents Kevin Ross of Falmouth Country Club, Chuck Ravis of Augusta Country Club and Kyle Evans of Waterville Country Club agreed to spend roughly $6,600 apiece on a $20,000 Ransomes GA-60. A lawyer is drafting a contract covering when each course would use the aerifier and how repairs would be paid.

"Basically, I get it the last two weeks of September," Ross said. "Kyle has it the first two weeks of October and Chuck the last two. And we agreed that no matter where it breaks down, we'd share any repair costs equally."

"Spending $20,000 for a piece of equipment I needed just two weeks a year didn't make sense. But getting it for less than $7,000 made a lot of sense."

Ross, Evans and Ravis are all experienced superintendents. They have known each other for many years and are familiar with one another's staffs, especially the mechanics.

"I'm comfortable with their guys and they are with mine. When we presented the idea to our boards, they all jumped on it pretty quickly," Ross said.

Superintendents have a long tradition of lending equipment to fellow superintendents at nearby courses. The spirit of cooperation among course managers, even those at competing facilities, is a source of pride. But agreeing to share the cost of a new piece of equipment among several courses with different owners is unusual.

"[Jointly purchasing equipment] used to be done a lot in the 1960s, but clubs got away from it," said Terry Buchen, head superintendent at Double Eagle in Galena, Ohio. "It [jointly purchasing equipment] used to be a neat idea. A lot of people might be interested in that."

Sawtelle Bros., a Lawrence, Mass.-based equipment company, agreed to accept half the purchase price last fall and the other half this spring, making it easier on the three clubs involved, Ross said. All three should be able to share in the depreciation benefits as the aerifier ages, he added.

If the agreement works out, and Ross is confident it will, the clubs could share future costs of more-expensive equipment like fairway verticutters or greens aerifiers, he said. Other Maine clubs have approached Ross and the others about their agreement.

"I got a call from Steve Hoisington at Martindale [Auburn] the other day," Ross said. "He's interested in sharing the cost of greens."

The key is to reach an agreement with people you can work with. Chuck, Kyle and I have done that."

Deep drill aerators offer alternative

By PETER BLAIS

FALMOUTH, Maine — The condition of the greens on Falmouth Country Club's front nine has traditionally been a step behind the back nine. The roots, which averaged 10 inches in length five years ago, had shriveled to 4 to 5 inches by last spring.

That's when superintendent Kevin Ross decided to try the Floyd & McKay Deep Drill Aerofier on his front nine putting surfaces.

"By the end of the summer, all the greens were uniform," Ross said. "The roots were back to six to eight inches, I consider that a big improvement."

Verti-Drain and the Aerofier are the two major players in the fast-growing deep aerification market. Both have the hard pan that shallow aerators can compact 3 to 4 inches below the surface.

They fracture the soil to a depth of 10 or more inches, allowing air and water in and gas out. The loosened soil promotes better percolation, creates healthier root growth and delays or eliminates the need to rebuild greens.

"Thirty years ago, greens were cut at 1/4-inch, three or four times a week," said Pat Lucas, superintendent at Innis Arden Golf Club in Old Greenwich, Conn., and owner of Earthworks, a customized aerification company serving Northeast golf courses.

"Now they are cut at 1/8-inch every day. That's pushing the envelope and removed any cushion for error we used to have. Deep aerifying gives us back some of that cushion."

The 3,000-pound Floyd & McKay Aerofier uses variable-sized drills — Continued on page 33

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Keeping in mind that a pre-season tune-up can avoid downtime and frustration caused by breakdowns, Feb. 21-25 has been declared Sprayer Tune-Up Week, said Dr. Stephen Pearson, technical services manager for Spraying Systems Co.

Fifty agricultural and turf organizations are endorsing Sprayer Tune-Up Week, suggesting that mechanics normally check hardware and plumbing for signs of wear and tear; calibrate and replace worn nozzles; and review safety supplies and procedures. Calibrating and tuning up equipment can yield big financial dividends, saving as much as $5 per acre on each chemical applied, according to the organizations.

Deep drill aeration

Continued from page 30

1/2-, 5/8- and 3/4-inch — for different soils and times of the year. Drill depths are adjustable from zero to 10 inches and capable of doing a 6,000-square-foot green in 30 minutes (6 inches deep) to an hour (10 inches deep). The big advantage over the Verti-Drain is the quicker green healing time, according to Ross and Lucas.

The Verti-Drain's lifting and shattering action disturbs the putting surface, often requiring 10 to 14 days to heal. Floyd & McKay's Deep Drill Aerofier spins the compacted soil out of its holes (located 5 inches apart) causing less disruption to the green.

"In one or two days, you don’t even notice the drill holes," Ross said. "The members love it."

Added Lucas: "It does the same thing as the Verti-Drain, but without the after-effects."

The problem, at least for Northern courses that might use the machine twice a year, is the cost — about $20,000. For them, leasing the Aerofier might make more sense. Southern courses that aerify six to eight times yearly are more likely to consider purchasing a unit, Ross and Lucas agreed.

Ross subcontracted his greens out to a turf management company. The charge was 3.5 cents per square foot. The total cost for Falmouth CC's nine greens was $2,200.

Lucas has a thriving business, leasing his equipment to golf courses and athletic fields throughout the spring.

"We’re pretty quiet in July. Then things get busy again from mid-summer through early fall," he said.