

Back to basics

WHY ONE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT SHUNS THE QUICK-FIX CHEMICAL CURE FOR TURFGRASS PROBLEMS

by
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Photos also by David Wolff

GCN INTERVIEWS
MIKE STAMEY,
GOLF COURSE
SUPERINTENDENT
AT THE 18-HOLE
MAGGIE VALLEY
(N.C.) CLUB GOLF
COURSE.

Mike Stamey's path to become a Class A golf course superintendent was a bootstrap journey.

In 1982, Stamey's first job after high school was on the maintenance staff of a resort course, the Great Smokies Hilton in Asheville, N.C., where he worked for superintendent J.W. Tipton. Tipton started his career at Asheville Country Club, which his father helped build. After leaving Asheville, Tipton helped build the Maggie Valley Club Golf Course. In fact, he sowed the fairways by hand. After 10 years at Maggie Valley, Tipton left to work at the Great Smokies course. While at Great Smokies, Stamey told Tipton that one day he'd be superintendent at Maggie Valley.

"Mr. Tipton told me I had a long way to go," Stamey says. "He said I had potential, but I'd have to stay at the Hilton, dedicate myself, and grind and strive to learn everything I could."

Eleven years later, Tipton retired, and Stamey became superintendent at Great Smokies. A few years later, the Maggie Valley job opened up, and Stamey applied. He was chosen among 45 applicants.

"The general manager and golf professional wanted someone familiar with the resort business," Stamey says. "But they looked at my greens and felt I was more knowledgeable and would fit in at Maggie Valley. I worked my way up the ladder and became a Class A superintendent in 1988, even though I've had no formal turfgrass education. It's difficult to do what I did these days."

Q You call yourself an old-school superintendent. Why?

I'm big on cultural practices, not quick fixes with chemicals. They're good tools, but it's all about how you prep your soil and grass. That's what really pays off and saves money. I don't spend much on chemicals and am

not into fertilizing heavily. I keep my grasses hungry. My course is on a good nutrition program, but if the grass is hungry, it doesn't have a chance to develop too much top plant or leaf blade.

We don't have problems with brown patch during hot summer months. Sometimes we have issues with dollar spot, but I handle them with a preventive fungicide spray program.

Nowadays, cultural practices are forgotten at times. Young people coming out of turf schools are taught to look for specific chemicals to fix problems.

Q What's your budget?

Last year, my maintenance budget was \$415,000. I spent \$38,000 on chemicals and fertilizer, even though we were budgeted for \$45,000. I'm expected to deliver the best quality golf course with the budget I have.

Q Why have cultural practices become forgotten?

Young superintendents are taught the basics of mowing, fertilization and aerification, but they aren't told the consequences of mowing low when it's hot and wet, for example. They're going to get disease and will have to apply more chemicals. Ownership or management wants tournament conditions every day, year-round, and it's not always possible to do that. You have to know when it's not going to work and catch potential problems before they get really bad.

Many times young superintendents are afraid to do that, and that's when they get into trouble and lose two or three greens. They ask themselves what happened. It must have been something in the soil or the weather wasn't right. But basically, it was their fault. If you lose turf, it's your fault because you didn't look out for the right cultural practices. If you keep cutting bentgrass greens at 0.155 of an inch when it's 90 F

with afternoon thunderstorms, you didn't do what you needed to do to maintain the greens properly. Superintendents need the courage to tell ownership they're in a tough situation and have to change mowing heights for a few weeks to get through a tough period until they can get the course back to where it needs to be.

Q What's the key element of your cultural practices?

Aerifying wall to wall twice a year. The course has pushup greens that were built in the early 1960s. When I came here, they had been overtaken by *Poa annua*. They were about 90 percent *Poa* with some bentgrass. They'd get so hard in summer that I couldn't get any water into them. We began a deep-tine aerification program, and today, the greens are 85 percent Penncross bentgrass. We pushed the bentgrass and let the *Poa* struggle. Doing that in summer really develops bentgrass.

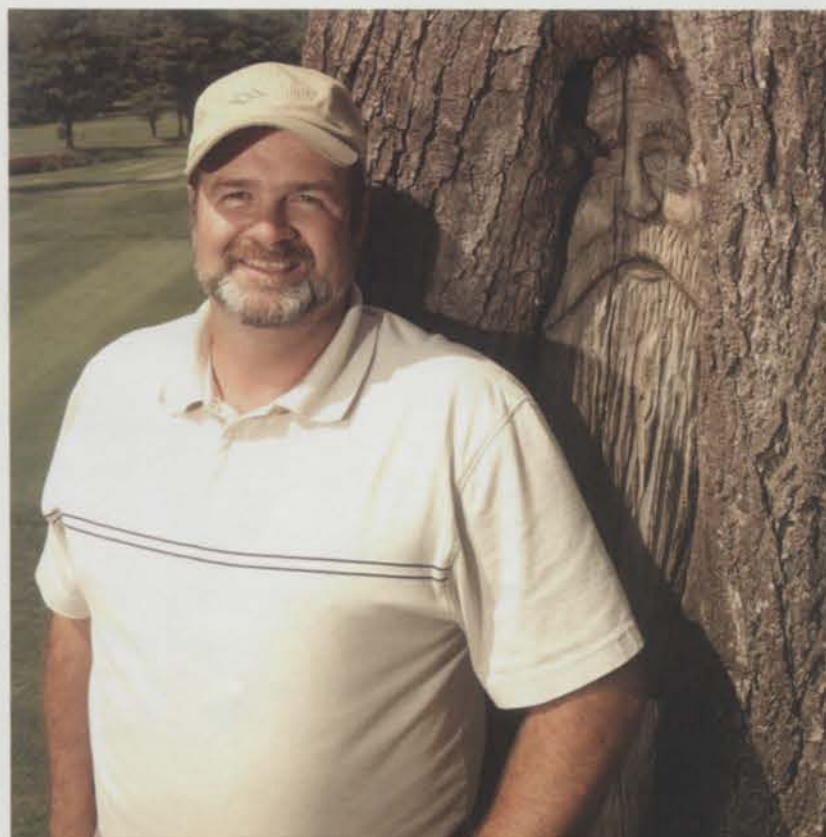
Q What is your target for root depth?

With pushup greens, there's no drainage. Aerifying with small tines affects only the first two or three inches of the soil. That's as far as the root system will develop. We use a vertidrain machine in spring and fall. On our greens, we go down 10 to 12 inches. We're taking out the nasty stuff and adding new topdressing — a mix of 85 percent sand and 15 percent peat. We've developed the root system six- to eight-inches deep. This improved the greens and kept us from having to rebuild them. Our greens are in great shape now.

Q When do you aerify?

I convinced the club's ownership to give me a window of the last two weeks in March and the first two weeks of September. Most golf clubs will push back mainte-





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nance because it's disruptive to golfers. They want you to do it when play slows down. The club doesn't schedule tournaments or outings during those times. If it rains, we can hold off. With two weeks, I can pick the sunny days.

Q Which aerification period is most important?

Fall is the most important time for a golf course. In summer, it's hot, and we're irrigating and mowing every day. The soil is being compacted. In fall, the turf is going through a transition period, and it needs to breathe and get nutrients. One aerification in spring doesn't do enough to prepare the course for the hot weather in summer. It needs a fall aerification, too.

What you do in September is what your course will look like the following season. The goal is to develop the roots and plants before cold weather hits. We can have frost in October, but we want four weeks of good growing weather. Some courses around here push their aerification into late October. By doing that, the holes stay open all winter, and the greens struggle.

Aerification and fertilization get the turf back to top condition before winter, which is just as stressful as summer. If we can make it through summer and prep the course in fall, we'll have it in great condition for winter and ready for freezing temperatures and rain.

Q Have you modified your aerification program?

Now that we have the greens where we want them, we did a small-tine aerification with a Ryan GA-30 this spring. In spring, many golfers are coming back and want to play. We use a smaller aerator because the greens heal much faster. We used one-half-inch coring tines and applied fertilizer when the holes are open. After aerifying, we go right behind with a greens mower to clean up the top surface.

The GA-30 comes in handy at other times. If the greens need to breathe a little bit, we put on solid quad tines and poke holes in the greens during the evening. After we've mowed the next morning, no one knows we've aerified.

We do the greens first, then tees and fairways. We don't pick up cores on fairways. We let them dry and mow at one-half inch. Then we blow off the tufts of grass into the roughs.

Q What is your irrigation philosophy?

Again, I consider this part of my cultural practices. I look at each green individually. If I insist each green get 20 minutes of water one night, some might be getting too much, and that creates disease or compaction. If part of a green is in shade and gets too much water, there will be problems. I change irrigation heads or nozzles to find the balance each green needs. I stay on top of issues and fix potential problems before they come up.

Good turf management is about seeing what can happen if you don't do certain things.

Q Is mowing a cultural practice?

Absolutely. We usually mow our greens at 0.155 of an inch. But in summer, when it's starting to get hot and there are thunderstorms, we raise the cutting height a bit. We'll take off the grooved rollers and put on solid rollers. We want to let the grass grow and thicken a bit because the summer heat is already thinning out the turf. We don't need a grooved roller to thin them out anymore – the grass is in a stress period.

Superintendents can't just keep mowing low to get a fast green speed. They've got to have a program that fits the conditions. If you have to raise cutting height to keep a quality surface, then that's what you need to do. Sometimes you have to give up a little speed. If the greens are at eight or nine on the Stimpmeter, maybe they need to be at seven for a while to keep a good, quality green throughout the season.

Q Is most of the work done by your staff?

Besides myself, I have an assistant, Robby Henderson; a mechanic, Horace Downs; and six full-time, year-round employees. We do everything in-house. I guess that's another part of being old school, and it can pay big dividends.

The owners had a four-year plan to complete the infrastructure, renovate the bunkers and construct a large tee complex on hole No. 1. They asked if we needed to hire an architect, and I said no. I redesigned 32 existing bunkers, built 12 new ones and completed the other two projects all in one year.

Conservatively, I'd estimate that doing as much as possible in-house saved the club more than \$150,000.

Q What other cultural practices do you use?

I use growth regulators on fairways and tees only. Our cool-season grasses come on pretty strong in spring. However, I don't use growth regulators on the greens. They're managed strictly by cultural practices. As for wetting agents, we apply them through our irrigation system.

I rotate fungicides, but I don't use a lot of biostimulants such as kelp or microbial inoculants. I call this witch-doctor stuff. I've tried them but have never gotten any results.

I'll spoon feed my fertilizer in the summer with liquid growth products and do this every two weeks from June through August.

Finally, I take soil samples every year and send them to three different labs, then take an average of the results.

Q What advice would you give to young superintendents to become proponents of using cultural practices instead of seeking quick-fix, chemical cures?

They've got to get back to the basics. What grows grass? It's good aerification, irrigation, fertilization and topdressing programs. It's the basics of turf management. Don't buy and try everything the chemical salesmen bring around. My soil analysis tells me what the turf needs, and that's what I give it.

There are no quick fixes. It takes time to solve problems or reverse trends. Develop a program that best fits your golf course. The environment and situation could be totally different 20 miles down the road. GCN

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