Real-Life Solutions

RIVIERA CC, PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIF.

High-Traffic Headaches

A superintendent employed biological products to increase turf strength on greens so they could endure an increase in players.

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aul Ramina surveyed the greens at Riviera CC when he became superintendent there in July 1998 and recognized quickly that challenges lay ahead.

George C. Thomas designed the championship course, located in Pacific Palisades, Calif., in 1927, and insisted on including his signature small greens in the project. Over the years, rounds slowly increased as Riviera's stature grew. An aggressive membership drive in the 1980s expanded the number of players at the course, and rounds nearly doubled from 40,000 in the late '70s rounds to 70,000 last year. As a result, the greens took a beating.

But Riviera couldn't enlarge the putting surfaces to accommodate more traffic without destroying the course's character. By the time Ramina arrived, the greens needed help.

The problem

Riviera's greens suffered from poor nutrient retention in the soil, resulting in thin, weak turf. Ramina decided to recondition the soil to increase turf strength, and he wanted a one-stop shop where he could purchase products to help him do that. "When you're in competition to host major tournaments the way this course is, you must have greens that meet high expectations," he says.

"Soil balance is vital to keeping turf healthy, but you have to figure out how to balance it on a micronutrient level," Ramina says. "It's not enough just to throw out a number of products and hope that some of them help. You have to tailor your program to fit the needs of your course."

At the Links at Challedon in Mount Airy, Md., where Ramina was employed before he came to Riviera, he worked with Floratine, a Collierville, Tenn.-based turf products company. Floratine provides biological products including soil amendments, fertilizers and soil oxygenators. Ramina was im-

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pressed with the company and its products, and he was convinced that Floratine should be involved in the Riviera green restoration.

So he called Bill Byrnes, Floratine's president, and asked him to assess Riviera's greens to see if his products could help. Byrnes says targeted treatment of damaged turf requires more than just an over-the-phone description of the problem.

"Prescription without diagnosis is malpractice, and that applies to turf companies as well as to doctors," Byrnes says. "Despite what we're all striving for, there's no silver bullet. You have to get down on the ground to find out precisely what the grass needs before you start suggesting chemical solutions."

Ramina took soil and plant-tissue samples and had them analyzed by an independent laboratory. The results weren't good.

"A residual thatch layer prevented nutrients from getting through to the soil, and the greens weren't feeding as well as they needed," Byrnes says. "Good grass was hard to grow under those conditions."

The test results showed that the turf lacked sufficient potassium, phosphorus and nitrogen and calcium.

The solution

Byrne's first recommendation was to use a foliar biosstimulant called Astron, which provides grass with immediate nutritional needs. It also contains slow-release nutrients that penetrate plant leaves to feed them over a longer period of time.

"We're looking for long-term solutions, not just quick fixes," Byrnes says. "You want to feed the turf immediately, but you also want to provide for it over time."

Ramina also used Floratine's Knife product, a fortified iron supplement for quick, long-lasting greening of all grasses; and CalpHlex, a calcium supplement for nutrient balancing, salt reduction and pH management.

Ramina saw improvement within 24 hours of the first foliar application and soil conditions improved almost immediately.

Riviera's maintenance crew also began an aggressive aeration program that broke up the thatch layer. Ramina also noticed the turf recovered from injury more quickly.

But the true test of the program was how the pros reacted to the greens.

"The players had nothing but good things to say about the greens at the Nissan Open in February — a complete reversal since the 1995 PGA Championship, when everyone complained about the greens," Ramina says.

Ramina and Byrnes continue to work together to keep the greens in top condition.

"We know that not everyone has the budget for it over time," Byrnes says. "We're willing to work with all superintendents to find a plan that will fit within their budgets," Byrnes says.