

# Under The Gun

By Merrell Noden, *The Met Golfer*

(Editor's Note: This article first appeared in *The Met Golfer*, the official publication of the Metropolitan (NY) Golf Association, published by GOLF MAGAZINE.)

Today's golf course superintendents are under more pressure than ever to present ultra-fast greens and perfect conditions-and it just might be working against the club members who demand them.

Lightning fast greens and a prolonged drought cost Chip Lafferty his job.

Todd Raisch couldn't believe his eyes on that awful morning in August 2001. There, where the sixth green of Ridgewood Country Club's Center nine had been just a few days earlier, was nothing but bare dirt. As the New Jersey club's superintendent, Raisch knew better than anyone how stubborn the club's anthracnose problem was, but this was ridiculous. The green had all but vanished.

"What was by all comparisons one of our best greens, with only a minor infection of anthracnose earlier in the week, was gone, and I mean gone," Raisch would later recall in the New Jersey Superintendents' Association newsletter. "There were no patches of yellow blades or even tan-colored leaves that were melting out. The green skipped those phases and went straight to dirt, overnight. To quote my Green Chairman, it was 'defense grade anthracnose.'

"You may recognize the problem, because Ridgewood is not the only Met Area club to recently do battle with anthracnose, a fungal disease that attacks turfgrass that is already under stress from heat, drought, a lack of exposure to sunlight and air, or such maintenance practices as frequent mowing, topdressing, and rolling. Worse, it has just added to the pressure so many superintendents find

themselves under, from severe weather conditions to budget cuts, to unrealistic expectations from club members.

The most unrealistic of those expectations is ultra-fast greens. And that's a serious problem for superintendents trying to keep their members happy, particularly during the dog days of summer when keeping bentgrass greens race-car fast can be like handing them a death sentence. That is, of course, if anthracnose doesn't get them first.

As golfers, we experience anthracnose as yellow, thinning grass. It's been around since the 1920s, but over the last five years the incidence of anthracnose has skyrocketed, and no region of the country has been hit harder than the northeast. Dr. Bruce Clarke, a turfgrass pathologist who directs the Center for Turfgrass Science at Rutgers University in New Jersey, says he is seeing three to four times as many cases as he did just a few years ago. "In the past," he says, "you heard about it from a few, isolated golf courses. Now, you hear it from dozens of courses each year."

Dr. Frank Rossi warns clubs not to pressure their superintendents for U.S. Open-like greens. (Continued on Page 14)



**HOSTS OF THE SCHOLARSHIP SCRAMBLE**, from the left, are Wayne Willey, Larry Weisenbeck, Tom Johnson and Chip Norman -- all from New Richmond Golf Club. Tom Johnson was host superintendent.

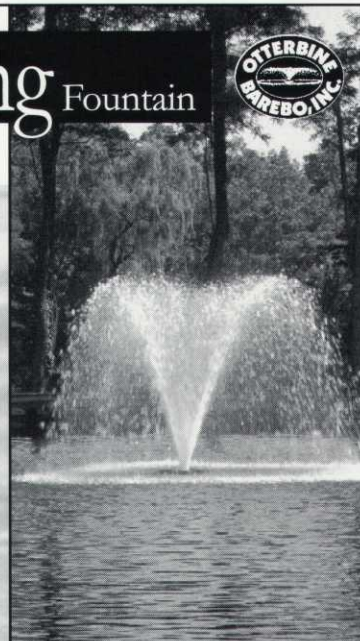
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But it's not just anthracnose that's thriving, threatening to take over the world like some mutated life form in a bad sci-fi movie. "Dollar spot," one of the first turf diseases ever identified in the U.S., also back in the 1920s, has made a dramatic comeback. The disease, which appears as sunken brown spots, thrives on close-cut turf, Clarke says, like the putting surfaces at many Met Area clubs. Thankfully, supers can use fungicides to control it.

Raisch's story has a happy ending, thanks both to his own communication skills and to an understanding Ridgewood membership. Together, they weighed several strategies to combat the problem, some radical (regrassing and reconstruction of the greens), others less dramatic. In the end, Ridgewood razed some of its oaks to get more light and air onto the greens, and to get off what Raisch calls "the stimpeter roller-coaster," i.e., 11 on the weekends, 10 during the week, 13 during member-guests. The club's Board of Directors mandated that for the upcoming 2002 season, greens would not roll faster than 9.5 throughout the week

"regardless of what was being contested or who was playing."

The changes made all the difference. "We did see anthracnose develop on a few greens in late June, but it never took hold," Raisch writes. "...Without question the overall membership enjoyed the change, especially since the ball still rolled true."

Anthracnose is an opportunistic bully. It attacks turf already weakened by stress, one obvious source of which is the hot, dry weather our area has endured the past few years. The drought, which began in 1998, reached catastrophic levels last year. The six months ending with February 2002 saw the lowest rainfall on record in northern New Jersey for that period and the summer that followed was the hottest since records first were kept. For superintendents, it was a massive double-punch.

"The metropolitan area typically experiences about 15 to 20 days when the temperature reaches 90," says Dr. Frank Rossi, a turfgrass scientist at Cornell University. "This past year there were about 50. That's like trying to grow grass in Raleigh, North Carolina. And of course in Raleigh they

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have bermuda grass that can survive that heat or bentgrass which is much more tolerant of the pressures than annual bluegrass."

But while golfers are stuck with the heat, and to some extent with the limited watering regimes mandated in many municipalities, they can still make smart, informed choices about the conditions they expect to find at their clubs. That can make all the difference.

Rossi regularly lectures clubs and related golf organizations on this subject (he was one of the featured speakers at the MGA Foundation's Presidents' Council last fall), hoping to persuade golfers not to get too greedy in their pursuit of quality. "My message is simple," he says. "Superintendents are being pressured to provide U.S. Open conditions on a daily basis, and that's just not a tenable situation. If golfers continue to pressure for these conditions day-in, day-out—and we're talking about green speeds on the order of 10.5, 11—what they do is narrow the superintendents' margin for error."

Superintendents learn quickly. "When you're maintaining putting green turf, or any turf, at that state, and you have one little thing go wrong, it's like balancing on a razor," says Chip Lafferty, the superintendent at Rye Golf Club in Westchester County. "You're going to fall off."

In Lafferty's case, falling off meant losing his job as superintendent at Wykagyl Country Club, also in Westchester, after a tough 2002 season. It reached its nadir in early July—just prior to the arrival of the PGA's Sybase Big Apple Classic—when the power failed and he was unable to pump water for two days straight when the temperature was pushing 100 degrees. The club later hired two outside turf consultants, who basically confirmed what Lafferty had been saying all along: "We were trying to get the greens rolling at 11 every day and you just can't do that in the heat of the summer. It's something I'll never try again," says a sadder, wiser Lafferty, who managed to land on his feet at Rye.

This is largely a regional problem. When Rossi tells superintendents in other parts of the country about our green speeds, "they basically fall off their chairs," he says. "[The obsession with fast greens] is on the two coasts and, to a certain extent, in the Chicago area."

In some ways, green speeds are just one more silly status symbol, like fast cars or how high a floor you live on. "It's comparisons," says John Carlone, the superintendent at Meadow Brook Club on Long Island. "Golfers love to have each other over for member-guests and compare things: My greens

are better than yours. My fairways are better. My bunkers are better than yours. It's like who has more hair left when they are 55! Is it really that important?"

Well, members think it is, largely because they can afford to. The Met Area has the most high-ticket clubs in the country, and when you've paid a king's ransom to join, you expect a lot in return.

One wonders what pleasure super-fast greens hold for the average member. Lafferty was curious enough to perform his own little study. On successive Saturdays he timed members' rounds. "I had the greens at 9.5 one weekend and the speed of play was about four hours," he says. "I kicked them up to 11.5 the next weekend and it was 5:25. There's a direct correlation to pace of play."

And, surely, to score. You have to wonder about the golfer who'd willingly add strokes to his score, plus an hour of precious time, in order to boast that he's playing greens rolling at 11.5. "It's an ego thing," says Tim Moraghan, the director of championship agronomy for the United States Golf Association and a member at Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey. "Members and sometimes superintendents like to be able to say, 'My greens are always at 11.' Well, good for you. I hope you can maintain it because you have turf-grass on the edge, and it's like any of us: You push, push,

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**FIELD EVENT WINNERS** at the Scholarship Scramble were, from the left, Bill Irving, Marlow Hansen, Jeremy Walker and Mickey Saatzer. Walker won long drive and the others were closest-to-pins.



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push, push, and the next thing you know, you're sick."

The Metropolitan Golf Association, through its championships, has been trying to set a more forgiving example. At last year's Ike Championship the decision was made to cut the devilish greens at Montclair to 9.5, no faster. "And the result was a great championship," recalls MGA Executive Director Jay Mottola. "We were able to use all of Montclair's classic hole locations, the pace of play was fast, and on a 6,500-yard course, just one player broke par."

Where have the unreasonable expectations come from? "It's demand from members who watch the Masters on television in April," Carlone says, "and say, 'Why is our course not like Augusta National?'"

In his role with the USGA, Moraghan knows better than just about anyone why not. "First off, you don't have hundreds of volunteers helping out," he says. "You don't have a huge budget. You don't have all the equipment companies bringing stuff in. You don't have two or three agronomists on call, and you don't have a couple of pathologists from the local universities coming in to help out." And, he could have added, you don't have a whole year to prepare for one week of peak conditions.

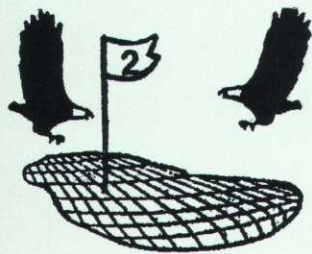
Mark Kuhns, the superintendent at Baltusrol and a newly elected board member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, has a slightly different take on things. He says that, in a way, superintendents themselves are to blame because they set such high standards for themselves and have become so good at what they do.

"Yes, the bar is higher than ever before [for superintendents], but the equipment's much better too," Kuhns says, noting with a chuckle that 26 years ago, when he got his first job as a super, at the Ligonier Country Club in western Pennsylvania, the club's water source was an old railway freight car which caught rain water. "The way I knew the tank was filled was whenever water was running over the top." He now relies on computer-automated irrigation that covers the entire course. "Don't blame only the members," he concludes.

"We all feel we can provide those conditions for the membership," Lafferty agrees, "and if we can't, I guess we have that paranoid feeling that the members are going to go out and get somebody who can."

The pressure can be intense. "They want the place perfect," Carlone adds. "They want the greens fast on the weekend. Just get it done. And you know what? We're going to get it done." Because, as Kuhns says, "We're so well trained and have the tools to do our jobs. We've found so many places to cut corners to do whatever we can to please the membership, that we'll get it done."

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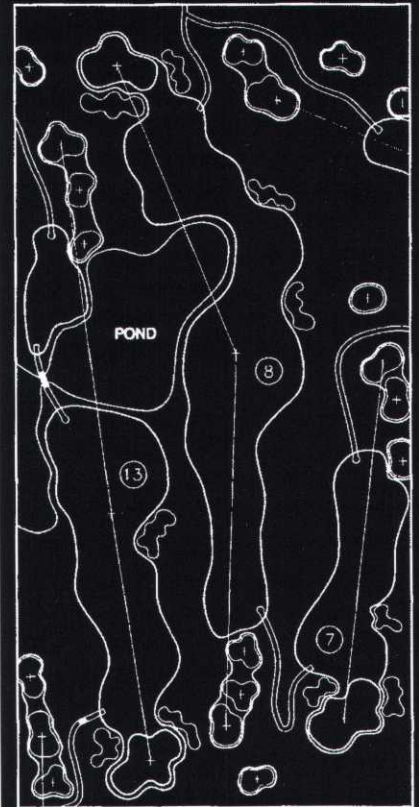
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Education helps. The oldest generation of superintendents may well not have gone to college at all, but the men and women trained today by the likes of Rossi and Clarke are likely to have four-year degrees in the appropriate sciences, plus all sorts of specialized certificates and licenses. Technical training is needed too, because now they spend so much time monitoring the shrinking number of chemicals they can use and precisely how much of each.

Long gone are the days when superintendents could rely on the old heavy metal fungicides which shotgunned everything. The chemicals are out there, but they must be applied far more carefully and only to treat specific problems—and that brings up another problem supers contend with: "They don't want to be seen spraying because a lot of guys really believe it's out-of-sight, out-of-mind," Rossi says. The GCSAA surveyed golfers and found that "seeing workers on the course" was one of their top complaints, not far behind the top answer, which just happens to be another maintenance necessity, aeration.

Clearly, maintenance is a conflict for a lot of club golfers: they want it out of sight, but they also want a perfect course. It's also clear that they must acquire realistic limits, if not for the sake of being reasonable and fair to their supers, then for the health of the club's turf. "We're reaching the biological limit of these plants," Rossi warns. "And it would be nice for golfers to at least recognize that their expectations are driving this."

## It's In the Hole...

Stephen and Amy Kimball had a new girl, Sara

**Michelle Kimball** was born June 18th, 2003 at about 4pm. She was 7.6 lbs, 20.25 inches long. Baby, Mom and Stephen are all doing well, and getting some sleep ...



**Don White** and his wife cele-

brated their 50th wedding anniversary on 27 June ...

**Jack MacKenzie** was married on June 21st. His brides name is Kim MacKenzie ... **Steve Roxberg** was presented with this year's MGCSA Scholarship at the Scholarship Scramble in New Richmond on June 30. Steve attends Penn State when he's not attending to his assistant superintendent duties at Wayzata Country Club...This year's Turfgrass Research Benefit Week raised over \$11,000 for local turfgrass research.



Pictured left to right at North Oaks Golf Club during the 17th Annual MGCSA Turf Research Benefit Week are AJoe Fischer, Quality Insulation, St. Louis Park; Tom Osberg, JNR Adjustment Company, Plymouth; host superintendent Jack McKenzie and his dog Nugget, and George Harper, Spartan Promotional Group, Tonka Bay. "North Oaks was in excellent condition, the greens were flawless and the fairways were impeccable -- not that I used them for hitting shots but they were nice to walk on! I want to make this an annual stop on my golf calendar," said Harper, who has participated in this benefit for the past 10 years and has contributed over \$3,000 towards turfgrass research. Not pictured with this group is Alan Lanners, Dial Lawyers, Plymouth.

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