REGRASSING FAIRWAYS

Perseverance Affects Change When Contending with Personal Agendas

By Donnacha Sean O’Connor
Superintendent, Alexandria Golf Club

My responsibility is to serve the golf course and members, and gain the support needed to make changes that lead to better golfing conditions. By nature, I prefer action to speeches, but also value what communication achieves. I work with my Green Committee to keep them well informed and to gain their support for projects. Attending Board of Directors meetings helps me keep my finger on the pulse of the membership and gives me insight into the agendas of various divisions within the membership. Writing a monthly newsletter and attending General Membership meetings is a great way to keep the membership informed. This is the key to making controversial improvements, but an extended effort may be required. Personal agendas present the largest obstacle to effecting change. However, I found that demonstrating success is most effective.

When I arrived at Alexandria Golf Club in January 2001, fairway turf had been in decline and the membership was unhappy. The problems causing poor turf quality were many and varied. The fairway grass had a history of being prone to wilting and required nightly watering, with additional syringing each afternoon. Turf loss was an annual event. These poor turf conditions presented a greater challenge than I had faced before. Turf died in my first year, as it had in the years prior to my arrival. Several factors contributed to the situation. Environmental conditions were poor due to too many trees and no fairway aeration program, and surface compaction was causing irrigation to run off, preventing even wetting of the soil profile. I established a bi-yearly fairway aeration program. Core aerifying and deep-tine aerification improved infiltration. I installed surface drainage in low-lying areas and implemented a judicious irrigation program. An aggressive tree maintenance/removal and root pruning program reduced competition. Poplar trees lining many of the fairways had roots encroaching into the fairway - an explanation for where all my irrigation went! Using a vibratory plow to sever the roots along the tree line had a dramatic effect in reducing water usage. I communicated with membership and kept them informed and up-to-date on the changes I was making.

At this point, things were starting to improve as water moved into the soil and was available to the grass. The turf was stronger and required less irrigation. The improved infiltration kept the surface drier and reduced compaction. Golfers saw an improvement in playing conditions, but remained dissatisfied with the playability of the grass on the fairways. Over the last decade, the fairways were lowered from 1.25" to .75" to meet the increasing demands for better playing conditions, often at the request of the better golfer. The reduction in height and use of more efficient mowers cut the Blue grass below what it could tolerate. Within three years, there was a transition from Blue grass to a mix with Poa annua. The colonization of the Poa helped maintain a dense turf and this went unnoticed by many golfers, until the Poa went into decline in the hot summer. The decline in Poa caused a domino effect. In decline, it created voids in the turf canopy that exposed the soil, causing an increase in surface compaction. The compaction made it impossible for new plants to establish. The compaction also affected the soil’s ability to take in water and release toxic gasses from the root zone, adding to further decline. Without the density and upright growth of the Poa, the remaining Blue grass assumed a prostrate growth habit. Lateral growth, preventing other grass from colonizing the surrounding area, further reduced recovery and density.

Remember, you cannot pick a pear from an apple tree and it quickly became apparent that improved maintenance practices would only be part of the story. The fairways now consisted of a mixture of Blue grass, Poa Annua, Rye grass and native Bent grasses. This hodge-podge of grasses was sparse and not uniform. Turf type was now the limiting factor. Our variety of Bluegrass was not capable of creating a quality fairway. At fl" mowing height, the Bluegrass survived by growing below the height of cut. I reduced the mowing height to .75" to cultivate the Poa and native Bent grasses.

In the past, the Blue grass mix had provided a reasonable playing surface. Many (Continued on Page 15)
senior male members recounted the days of old, when the fairways were "great." Those members thought the short cut grass was for the benefit of the low handicap golfer who likes to pinch the ball, rather than sweep it. They also concluded that the reduced mowing height of fi" was increasing the decline in turf. No doubt, the shorter mowing height of fi" had reduced the competitiveness of the Blue grass, but that grass was gone and an increase in height of cut now was not going to bring it back.

The pitfall I failed to avoid was not recognizing the existing friction between high and low handicap golfers; I thought my agronomic reasons for reducing height would stand on their own. As a result, a vocal minority, with nothing but time on their hands, became set against my program for change. I failed to convince some that my goal was to improve turf density, not satisfy the demands of the low handicap golfer. By lowering the height of cut to fi" to improve uniformity, I underestimated the impact it would have on high handicap golfers. Educating the members that mowing grass longer would not increase the density of the stand proved to be a most difficult concept to convey.

In September 2001, using Primo growth regulator at .75 oz/1000, we slit seeded #4 fairway with Creeping Bent grass and had a good catch, but the existing turf species prevented strong establishment. We noticed an overall improvement, due to a reduced population of Bluegrass, but not a significant enough improvement to justify the disruption to play.

Spring 2002, members demanded marked fairway improvement and they wanted it quickly. In response, I recommended fairway regrassing with the possibility of course closure. The membership's uproar reaction to the possible closing of the golf course was deafening. The contingent of senior men, who had decided mowing the fairways short was the problem, vociferously expressed their opinion. The "new Super" had only increased the problem by mowing the fairways even shorter. Seniors continued to associate height of cut with density and wanted it mowed 1" long. This contingent saw my recommendation to regrass with Bent grass cut at a low height as catering to the high handicap golfer. They wanted the regrassing to be done with Blue grass, a grass more friendly to the high handicap golfer. I explained that Blue grass would be difficult to establish and too slow, but they would only hear what fit with their preconceptions.

Summer 2002, we tested plots with Creeping Bent grass, Colonial Bent grass and a low mow Blue grass. The Blue
Regrassing Fairways—
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Regressing Fairways—

grass took several months to establish a
good stand of turf, whereas the Bent
grasses took only a few weeks. Therefore,
for a membership that was looking for fast
results, Bent grasses' quick germination
and establishment was the only option.
We looked at Colonial for the following
reasons: it can be mowed higher, has an
good stand of turf, whereas the Bent
class is sensitive to most post-care herbicides,
products such as Prograss and Dimension.

Options to eliminate or reduce
Poa annua. As anticipated, we got a mix
stand of Bent and Poa. However, the two
grasses blend very well together and look
completely uniform to the untrained eye.
Options to eliminate or reduce Poa in a
Colonial stand are very limited. Colonial
is best fit for the majority of our
members. At this point I thought we were
on track, because the seniors would see
this as a solution that would benefit them
too.

My naivety was soon brought to light.
The group of senior men, who played
almost every day, became known as the
Blue grass Faction. The Blue grass Faction
would drag turf type into the discussion
at every meeting. I repeatedly addressed
the purpose of the low mowing practices
in articles written for our monthly
newsletter. I explained why fairways
with less Blue grass had improved, but
fairways with a large percentage of Blue
glass were our poorest fairways. I gave
positive reasons for regrassing with
Colonial Bent grass. It was like reasoning
with a wall - they were alienated and
their minds were closed. In order to move
forward, a demonstration was required.

Mid-August 2002, I renovated a 12,000
sq. ft. test area on the front of fairway #5.
We killed the existing turf with a non-
selective herbicide (Round Up) and over-
seeded with Colonial Bent grass. The seed
was quick to germinate, but so was the
Poa annua. As anticipated, we got a mix
stand of Bent and Poa. However, the two
grasses blend very well together and look
completely uniform to the untrained eye.
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The Regrassing Process

+ Communicate intentions and rationale
+ Muster all possible support
+ Spray Round Up on the Fairway
+ Wait 5 days before mowing
+ Scalp the grass as short as possible,
+ Core aeration, about an inch deep and as
many holes as possible
+ Pulverize cores and remove thatch
+ Slit seed in three directions with a Verti-
seed slit seeder (Charterhouse
Redexim) at .5 lbs/1000
+ Spray additional seed at .5 lbs/1000 over
the top
+ Drag
+ Water
+ Fertilize

The trial area was open for play in 5
weeks with excellent results. The results
were well worth the effort and disruption,
so long as the course stayed open, and the
surface was more playable for all handicap.
But we were still facing great pressure
from members, due to the anticipated
disruption of play for any length of time.
Some members threatened to go on tem-
porary leave for the duration of the
regrassing. The Board of Directors was
supportive of fairway regrassing and
promptly changed the leave policy for
members, requiring medical or extraordi-
nary circumstances.

Summer 2003, our goal
was to improve communica-
tion with the general mem-
bership. We held General
Membership meetings specif-
ic to fairway regrassing in
order to set a more positive
tone and educate undecided
members. The Blue grass
faction was unreasonable
during these meetings and
defied to our demonstrated
facts. This convinced the
majority that it was a deci-
sion best left to an expert. In
the course of those meetings,
we got our message through

and gained the support to overcome the
vocal minority. The Grounds Committee
recommended finishing #5 and renovat-
ing #1 in order to test not closing the golf
course. Their recommendation met with
Board approval.

Mid-August 2003, #5 and #1 were
regrassed. Round Up was used on the #5
fairway. In an attempt to reduce Poa ger-
mination, we used Basimid Granular, a
soil fumigant on the #1 fairway. The
Basimid was applied according to the
label instructions. Incorporating the gran-
ules into the soil was limited to aerating
the fairway, spreading the granules and
dragging them into the aeration holes.
This was followed by the prescribed irri-
gation to trap the gas.

The first cut of rough was mowed to
fairway height and members moved their
ball off and played from there. Both fair-
ways were open for play in six weeks and
the results were well received. #1 hole
had to be closed for a week while using
the Basimid. The process was less con-
trolled than I would have liked. It did
reduce Poa germination, but it did not
eradicate the Poa. Keeping those facts in
mind and weighing in the higher cost, we
determined that Round Up was our best
solution.

We had confirmed the following:
playability improved for all golfers when
compared to previous conditions; we did
not have to close the golf course at all, and
members were not assessed any fees.

Naysayers had been calling for a vote,
but without the need for borrowing funds
or assessing fees, the Board was not
required to do so. The Board stuck to its
guns and made the decision, showing
tremendous faith in me and in the process
we had gone through. The decision was
to complete the front nine in 2004 and the
back nine in 2005.

This year of 2004, our newly regrassed
fairways opened for play after six weeks
and are exceeding expectations. Our new
fairways are mowed at 5/8" and the
majority of the membership is thrilled
with the results. Our fairway regrassing
project is a success. However, what could
have been a straightforward process was
held up by personal agendas. A large
majority of the Blue grass Faction is very
pleased with the outcome of all our efforts
and, with only a few exceptions, the gen-
eral membership is unified in its support
for regrassing. It was perseverance and
demonstrated success that enabled us to
effect change.