



In Bounds

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Weather patterns in recent years have been quite strange. It would be utter arrogance on my behalf to claim that the human population could possibly create what some term as "Global Warming." But the last three winters, with limited snow and warmer than average temperatures in the Upper Midwest, does indicate odd climatic trends.

The spring of 2003 broke with moderate damage upon my Poa greens and exposed tee and fairway surfaces. An extremely dry fall followed by a winter with virtually no snow cover until the month of January, and the resulting desiccated and cold temperature killed areas of turf were sold to my membership in the May newsletter as an "anomaly of Mother Nature. Time and the availability of annual bluegrass seed in our soil will heal the wounds quickly."

Once again in the spring of 2004, North Oaks Golf Club and many other courses in the area placed pins into thin greens and pulled out the slit seeders to repair their tees and fairways injured by yet another open winter. Courses predominantly comprised of bent grass and low mow blue grasses were in pretty good shape.

This could not be said for those of us with Poa annua. I prepared my players a bit earlier, the third week of April, for the bitter truth. "Mother Nature has reared her fickle head. The winter of '03-'04 was an aberration. My staff and I have begun remediation practices including aerification and overseeding."

First deemed an anomaly, and then claimed an aberration, the patterns of open winters persisted for another year. The Upper Midwest weather trend continued in '04 and '05, generating little moisture in the form of snow, rapidly fluctuating temperatures and creating conditions optimum for direct cold temperature kill, crown hydration and desiccation. Basically it spelled death to my Poa annua.

I knew my course was in deep trouble by mid February. During the early days of the "Big Show" southerly breezes had heralded a series of record-breaking warm days. Temperatures during that period topped out four days in a row at 47, 51, 53 and 48 degrees respectively. I awoke to single digit temperatures on the fifth day.

What little snow there was, generated only since the second week of January, had melted rapidly and formed vast areas of ice.

My walk about on February 11th, yet another warm 47 degree day, caused me great concern. Running from under the four inches of ice upon one of my seven sloping greens was a river of water, and the stench of silage so vile my stomach knotted in revulsion. At that point I knew the situation was grave. It didn't matter how healthy the turf had gone into the winter months. The twisted finger of Mother Nature had screwed me once again, only this time in monstrous proportions.

The following morning I spread 300 pounds of black sunflower seed upon my worst greens to melt through the ice layer. In my heart I knew that the efforts would be for naught, because most of my greens lie at the base of drainage patterns and collected water faster than it can run off. Alas, two days later it rained over one-half an inch, followed by a cold snap, sealing my fate.

Weeks passed. Local golfers donned their ice skates and enjoyed their course for an unprecedented opportunity. We had suddenly become a "four season club". I on the other hand took plugs and observed my Poa plants for any signs of life. Witnessing none, my mind began formulating a plan to encourage recovery. The players at North Oaks were not going to be happy with my observations or recommendations.

Although scheduled to review turf conditions at the April Board of Directors meeting, I requested a special mid-March appearance. The bitter news had to be shared in order for my recovery plan to be implemented. Strongly considering the potential of vast areas of dead putting surfaces, I proposed a plan to purchase lightweight covers for all 19 of our greens. These would be applied as soon as possible, even before the frost was out of the ground, in an effort to dry down the fine playing areas through the creation of micro green houses, stimulate the bent grass that remained and warm the soil for the next, more invasive action.

Once firm, the greens would be aggressively vertical mowed, aerified with "job saver" tines, overseeded with a

blend of bent grass varieties in an effort to out-compete the Poa, top dressed, brushed lightly and again covered until recovery was well under way. The program had to be embraced that night in order for me to purchase the covers (off season), have the top dressing delivered prior to road restrictions and order the seed that may be in high demand during the weeks and months ahead.

Although broken hearted, they appreciated my forthright honesty. The Board articulated well thought out questions and I had the opportunity to respond in fashion. Finally they passed a motion endorsing my recommendation and thus greatly relieving me of much of my anxiety. A concise letter of explanation was to be drafted and sent to our membership detailing the conditions and preparing them for the recovery efforts ahead.

Since that meeting, however, I have been surprised by the responses of a few of my professional peers. Comments from fellow peers in the industry indicate resentment by some superintendents of my progressive desire to educate my members, my employers, of our plight. Some suggested that to take plugs and investigate ongoing conditions was folly. Sales representatives have told me of instances where my judgment was being scrutinized for early disclosure of what could only be anticipated as another marginal spring.

As a responsible employee isn't it my charge to share information (good and bad), project scenarios and detail options? And as a responsible family man it is important for me to maintain employment. If this means sharing unwelcome, but true, information, then I am guilty. What is there to hide? It is what it is.

Two years ago I blamed the damage upon a weather "anomaly," last year it was an "aberration." Each time the membership was told a bit earlier and the extent of the injury tended to be a bit greater. This year, through early communication, I have been able to purchase the tools necessary for recovery on a timely basis. And more importantly, I have received the endorsement of my Board of Directors.

Yes, it saddens me to share the bad news of yet another tough spring. But through early communication I can twist it in a positive perspective. We now have the opportunity to introduce a more viable seed base with a competitive advantage. My membership can articulate the woes and recovery of our club with others in an educated fashion rather than a shadowed secret. And finally, full disclosure maintains the trust I have built with my golfers over the last 20 years. Nobody said it would be easy, but in my book honesty is the best, the only, policy.