

# An Adventure in Life

## The Dreaded "V" Word

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**Vandalism.** A word that sends shivers down the spine of superintendents.

Fortunately, throughout my career, I have never had to deal with any significant amount of vandalism. Missing tee markers, flags and pins, maybe a few divots out of a green thanks to a wayward sand wedge has been the extent of any vandalism that I have had to deal with. I guess I had to travel 7,700 miles to finally encounter what many in my profession have dealt with more than once: vandalism on a major scale.

On November 23 during my usual tour to check on the courses, I noticed numerous distinctive dark circles on many of the greens on the Old Course. Upon closer inspection, I determined that 12 of the 18 greens on the Old Course showed evidence of some sort of damage to the turf. It appeared as though someone had walked around making large semicircles and full circles with some damaging liquid. A petroleum product was initially ruled out due to the lack of an odor or sliminess to the touch. Upon close inspection, it was visible that the tips of the turf within the affected areas were beginning to turn from dark gray to brown in color. Within two days, these areas were totally brown and at death's door.

My initial diagnosis was that a product such as Round Up had been poured on the greens. Members of my staff confirmed that this type of product is readily available for purchase in Hong Kong and surrounding villages in the New Territories where we are located. As most superintendents are prone to do, we held out hope that the plants would only suffer superficial damage, which would not prove to be a problem in the long term. We had just come through a period of wet weather so we hoped that maybe the product had been washed off of the affected turf to the point where the turf would eventually recover. We always have hope, right? How many of us have looked for and seen real or imagined signs of life in winter-damaged turf? It is amazing how many young turf plants we can see or imagine in the late afternoon on a sunny



Repairing vandalism on 12 of 18 greens of the Old Course at Hong Kong Country Club.

day. But, after a few days, it was readily apparent as seen in the accompanying photos that little or no turf had survived in the affected areas. Now what?

When managing bent grass greens, one method would be to heavily aerify, seed and top-dress the damaged turf. Or in the case of older golf courses with greens of *Poa annua*, one could just wait for the *Poa annua* to grow back and fill in the dead spots. Unfortunately, that was not an option since the Bermuda grass varieties we have are not seeded but stolonized in

establishment. As I've mentioned before, the inability to overseed worn or damaged areas is a major negative in maintaining warm season turf grass. One has to actually reseed worn or damaged areas, or go to a program of aerifying, fertilizing and irrigation. Depending on the time of year, this type of recovery can be very slow.

Presently, our winter temperatures in Hong Kong are in the upper 40's to lower 50's Fahrenheit nighttime, and low 70's Fahrenheit during the day, great winter  
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## Vandalism—

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temperatures for a Midwestern superintendent accustomed to single digit highs during the day and below zero temperatures at night. But for warm season turf grasses, our current winter temperatures are not favorable for pushing growth. The relative cold here causes the warm season grasses to go into a semi-dormant stage, depending on the particular species of grass. The ability of the Bermuda grass to spread and recover in the damaged areas at this time of the year is very marginal. To wait for the Bermuda grass greens to heal and recover on their own was not an option for several reasons. Winter is the heavy golf season in Asia. Temperatures are very comfortable, and rainfall is minimal. It is not uncommon to go two or three months in Hong Kong without any measurable rainfall during the winter period from November through February. Recovery would occur way too slowly for the Bermuda grass greens.

The plan settled on was to bring in a staff of Lebanese temporary laborers from

a local employment agency. We put together a patching team of eight temporary laborers and two of our regular staff members. The process entailed removing a circular plug about 1.5" in diameter from the damaged area. This plug was discarded and a new plug was put into the vacant plug cavity within the area of damage. We assembled patching teams of eight workers with three people removing dead plugs, three people cutting out good plugs from a nursery, and two people carefully plugging the healthy transplants into the damaged areas. Once an area was repaired, light topdressing was applied to level the surface and blend the areas into the surrounding healthy turf. Although this proved to be a very tedious, slow process, it was the only realistic method to re-establish healthy turf in the damaged areas.

The staff and workers were undaunted by the slow, tedious, cumbersome nature of this project. The Chinese philosophy seems to be to accept boring repetitive work as the norm in a job. Perhaps because jobs are hard to come by due to the massive population here, the thought of people quitting or not showing up to

perform apparently menial tasks or tedious work is not in the Chinese thinking.

From a management standpoint creating a job or employing people is foremost in the thought process. Efficiency as we in the West perceive it is not an issue or a goal. Trading the use of equipment for a massive number of labor hours is not only cheaper in most cases, due to the low wage rates, but accomplishes the goal of employing as many people as possible. Imagine the look on the face of your favorite equipment rep when you tell him or her that you won't be needing any of that green or red or orange equipment this year as you will just employ an extra 100 or 200 people, and save money doing it!

All 12 greens were repaired by hand in about two weeks time with the patching team working 8-hour days for two weeks. Eight people, eight hours a day, six days per week, two weeks; that's ONLY 768 man hours, give or take. With the turf repairs completed, the damaged greens are now foliar fertilized twice a week, frequently top-dressed, and irrigated as needed.

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As of January 15 the greens showed improvement in the vandalized areas, but healing is slow due to the cool winter weather. New growth is visible moving into the damaged areas, but occurring very slowly. The putting surfaces are smooth and very playable, but the overall appearance is somewhat lacking. Had this damage occurred during the summer months when turf growth is at an optimum, a patching program would not have been necessary. The turf growth is so vigorous during the summer that the damaged areas would have recovered quite nicely within a month or less. Complete healing will probably not be complete until the weather begins to warm appreciably through March and April.

In our situation it is fortunate that we have three courses for the membership to play as our members can be as anxious and impatient as our workers are patient. We still receive heavy play on the old Course, but club events and tournaments can be moved to the other two courses in an attempt to minimize wear on the

stressed greens. All in all, just another challenge and experience in managing warm season turf in the Asian world

One final note: there is another story here where 'Witt the golf courses superintendent' became for a time 'Monk the crime scene investigator.' Despite the fact that we have a full-time staff of security people touring the course night and day, an 8-foot high security fence surrounding the entire course, this destruction, which had to take a number of hours to traverse 18 holes to damage 12 of them, was still able to take place!! After calling in all manner of police, analyzing the evidence, taking inventory, questioning all of the staff more than once and even making



Vandalism on the greens of Hong Kong Country Club

plaster casts of footprints, the perpetrators remain at large, and this mystery drops into the Cold Case file. Perhaps some day you will turn on the TV to find my story on your favorite crime shows, or at least featured on Unsolved Mysteries. Now that would give our association some recognition!

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