



Blindsided!

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Editor

Blindsided! That's how I felt coming out of last winter. With high hopes for minimal damage my grand anticipation was shattered by much more turf mortality than I had expected. Unlike three years prior, I thought that the course hadn't suffered anywhere near the winter weather fluctuations I felt necessary to sound the alarm. On my snow shoe forays onto the course there was no tell tale smell of death. And besides, with excelsior mats upon my historically worst greens the damage would be limited.

Right! Spring came with a rush the second week of March. High temperatures and a rapid snowmelt left obvious the trail of damage to be witnessed by those who ventured about the soggy track. Unfortunately for me I missed the return of the red-winged blackbird, the great blue heron and the aromatic odor of fermented dead plant cells as my week was spent assisting my closest aunt through hospice followed by a funeral service and all of the deeds accomplished by an executor. Nuts, death is never convenient and this unfortunate circumstance caused me to miss the signs of significant damage, and the ability to forewarn my players of the injury they could expect.

Mortality! Besides the fact that excelsior covers only protected strong biotypes of annual bluegrass leaving many dead splotches, the next greatest surprise of the spring was the unexpected generalized injury to my 17th green. This my one and only putting surface to not suffer a single blemish the winter of 2005, a spring that necessitated the over seeding of all of the other greens. Why the winter was so harsh to this surface I will never know, but my expectations of eventual and unassisted recovery did prolong my restoration efforts, much to my chagrin. To be truthful the 17th green wasn't in great playing condition until the later weeks of June. Neither were several of my fairways for that matter. There was a lot of turf to recover and I had over-anticipated a flush of growth when the spring temperatures began to rise. Special note to myself: communicate, communicate and communicate the challenges of recovery during a cold spring to membership.

Recuperation! One thing I continue to overlook and must post on the wall in front of my desk, "Mother Nature often works against us when we need her most. Count on this truth and you won't be disappointed." Indeed Her ways were against all of us as we tried to provide our clientele with great playing conditions. Cold, dry and windy conditions limited the recovery process, especially anywhere I had hoped my over seeding would take hold. There in lies one of the mistakes I made.

Second guess! In an effort to accelerate the greening of my track I over seeded the weakened fairways, tees and greens. Not just once, but twice and even three times in areas where I didn't observe any germination. No doubt I only prolonged the establishment of any seed each time I tore into the blemishes. Even though I had charged my irrigation system on the 13th of April, (early system start up was a lesson I learned in 2005) Mother Nature once again taught me what I already knew: grass won't grow until soil temperatures allow.

Plugged up! When it became obvious that the silver dollar sized dead spots left after the weak annual blue grass died were not going to recover for a long period of time even after aerification and over seeding we broke out the plugging tools. Not just cup and hex cutters either, for also in our arsenal of maintenance

equipment we have two two-inch, one six-inch and one eight-inch plugging tools. Practically a plug size for any blemish! And plug away we did, for two whole weeks and using up a serious chunk of our nursery green two of my staff repaired a variety of blemishes. But even that didn't satisfy my green thumb.

Green Side Up! Even after all remedial measures were implemented I still didn't like the blemishes on my practice, seventh and fifteenth greens. They weren't large, maybe a total of 400 square feet, but boy did they stand out as dead (actually slowly recovering after aerification, seeding and topdressing) areas in plain view. Tired of the grotesque scars my staff went through the process of excising the dead areas and replacing it with bent grass sod. The project was a great success with no sod shock or transition issues primarily due to laying the sod shallow and top dressing up, mowing high for an extended period of time (10 weeks), gradually lowering the height of cut with walk mowers and skip mowing even this late in the season. The use of rollers upon the green surface minimized any player concerns.

God's Formula! The slow recovery we experienced pushed me to do something I don't normally do, force spring growth with an application of readily available nitrogen. Not only did I not have staff to mow the projected 'hay', my budget didn't have an application scheduled. In hindsight I shouldn't have worried about the clippings produced as the cool temp's still limited growth and dead grass doesn't produce much debris either! The effects of the N was marginal, but what really helped was the application of a starter fertilizer fondly called God's Formula because it kick started recovery in the areas I had over seeded and plugged extensively. Combined with gradually warming soil temperatures the injuries gradually disappeared.

Camouflage! Years ago, during another turf mortality incident, I learned and this spring I implemented the advantages of "painting" my fine and rough turf areas. Not unlike the process used to brighten dormant warm season grasses, we applied turf paint upon several areas of the course. In fact my Assistant was nicknamed 'Picasso' as he went about sprucing up slow to recover or recovering grass. We also incorporated the top dressing of green sand upon our thin greens. While this cosmetic did help, the paint was a much better and longer lasting option.

Spit and Polish! Something I learned many years ago from a fellow superintendent is that if your greens look marginal the rest of your course better be great. And conversely if your course is undergoing a few maladies your greens need to be superb. For that reason we began edging bunkers in late April, limited our spring aerification program and stayed on top of manicure trim mowing, water coolers and clubhouse grounds maintenance. In hindsight addressing the 'little things' really reduced the pressure to have perfect putting surfaces right out of the gate.

Do Over! Shoulda, coulda and woulda are words only useful when evaluating the consequences of redial actions. If the hands of time could be reversed I would have closed, seeded and covered the 17th green, began the plug and patch program much earlier in the spring and painted the course sooner. The over seeded areas would have been torn up once and then left alone. And even though the irrigation was operational well before the frost had left the ground, I quite possibly would have charged it sooner because a pipe is much easier to fix than acres of desiccated plants. Finally I would have communicated sooner to my members how tough things were going to look.

Conclusion! Did I do everything I possibly could to provide my members with a fantastic golf course sooner rather than later? Maybe, maybe not. At the time the remedial plan implemented made sense. But considering the expectation of a 'normal' spring, or maybe even a hint of warmth, my hopes for a quick recovery were dashed. One thing I do know for certain, regardless of weather anomalies, human errors, player wear and tear or over-management, in the wise words of Dr. Don White, "Grass grows in spite of what we do."