

My Turning Point

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Many of us have had a moment in our career that we look back on and say it changed our professional outlook, a moment that, maybe, at the time, appeared to be about the worst event that ever happened to us, professionally.

When I encountered my moment, I had no idea of the journey on which it would lead me, a journey, happily, that I'm still on.

The spring of 2004 was a spring that neither I nor anyone who was on our staff here at The Minikahda Club will soon forget. It's the year our putting surfaces emerged from winter in the worst condition one could possibly imagine. *Poa annua* death affected every green to one degree or another. Recovery was an extremely long and painful process. No matter what we did to heal the greens, the process never proceeded as quickly as we hoped. We had greens with up to 60% loss and the recovery process was close to a 12 week painful ordeal.

Throughout the experience I learned some valuable lessons about communication, turf management, and my skills as a Superintendent. What I did not expect was how it would eventually mold my golf course management philosophy. A true blessing in disguise, this event was a precursor to what I feel has been one of the better career decisions I have made during my nine years as Superintendent.

By losing as much *Poa annua* on our greens as we did, it made the club realize how vulnerable our playing surfaces were to winter kill. Seasonal disease stress also was viewed for the threat it is, rather than something to accept and treat. We concluded *Poa annua* was our greatest liability and we felt it would hold us back from ever having truly great greens. This is a sea change for us, since our putting surface at Minikahda, as well as our overall conditioning, are highly regarded by our membership and others. Given this conclusion, we were confronted with the challenge of finding a way to increase our bentgrass populations and while at the same time providing quality playing surface with both turf types. My other goal was to find a way to improve the overall health and condition of our weakest grass, *Poa annua*. Basically an oxymoron right? I wanted to increase our bent population but have healthier *Poa* (a very confusing

process to say the least). We were spending a great deal of funds on fertilizers and fungicides and the one thought I kept coming back to was, why does the plant need all of these inputs to survive? Can we not provide a healthier more sustainable system through the use of an organic based program? If this works for the agriculture community why can it not work in our environment? I wanted to find a way to reduce our addiction to fungicides as well as our dependence on a regular fertility regime.

This thought process lead me down the road of investigating alternative products (which I now no longer view as alternative) such as seaweed extract, humic acid, molasses, fish hydrolysate, sea mineral water, yucca extract. These were just a few of the products we applied in order to provide a healthier plant as well as a healthier more sustainable soil system. There was no doubt that over time we began to produce a healthier plant. We pushed the envelope. We used less fertilizer and slowly reduced our fungicide usage as well. Benefits which our membership was seeing and feeling with the quality of our playing surfaces.

During the following years the quality of the golf course continued to improve. But what were we doing to increase our bentgrass population? What were we doing to reduce or eliminate our greatest liability? Re-grassing greens was out of the question. We had just completed a \$2.5 million restoration to the course which had involved shutting it down and re-grassing greens through yet another shutdown was not going to happen in the near term. My answer was to begin an over-seeding program. During the restoration we were able to remove between 350-400 trees on the course; trees, which created shade, making past over-seeding efforts a waste of time and money. Now with so many trees gone we might stand a chance to grow grass from overseeding.

For the next three years an application of two pounds of creeping bentgrass was applied to the greens both spring and fall in coordination with core aeration. Seed germinated, but with no change in our management, *Poa annua* continued to dominate the stand. We were spending close to \$5,000 for seed annually and



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when I heard a speaker at a seminar explain that in an over-seeding program only 2% of the seed will establish, it confirmed to me we were wasting our time and money with overseeding. I know none of my members would think a return of \$100 on a \$5,000 investment is very smart business. So we soon abandoned the idea of over-seeding greens.

In 2007 I received an email from one of our past Grounds Committee Chairman who was also a past President of the Club. He told me about a program being used at his club in California. At his club they were converting their 90-year-old greens to predominantly creeping bentgrass without over-seeding and without shutting down for re-grassing all while maintaining quality playing conditions for the members. Of course, I was curious and skeptical and needed to do my research.

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I called the Superintendent and learned about their program. He explained the theory and the consultants who were proponents of the theory. I contacted the main principal of the consulting firm and gathered more information. In all I spoke to about 5 or 6 Superintendents working with the firm. I also took a trip to 5 courses in California to see the results for myself. I returned to our club and met with the grounds committee and scheduled a

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meeting and site visit with one of the consulting firm's agronomists. The committee spent a great deal of time speaking with the consultants and investigating the benefits and potential challenges of the program. Impressed with what we heard, we hired the firm, Greenway Golf, and began the process to transition our 100 year old greens back to a predominately creeping bentgrass sward of turf.

We are now in our second season implementing the cultural and nutritional techniques recommended for this bentgrass management program. Throughout the process I have changed my approach to managing the finer grasses almost 180 degrees from my prior philosophy learned in college and in my years as an assistant. In the past our goal was to manage for the lowest common denominator (the *Poa*); now our goal became to create advantageous conditions for the bentgrass to thrive. In only the first season, about a 6-month growing season for us in Minneapolis, we saw on average a 20% increase in our greens bentgrass stand. As we strive to increase the population of bentgrass we are seeing additional benefits such as a reduction in fertility as well as fungicide usage. The entire system seems healthier and more sustainable. We know not every year will provide substantial reductions in fungicide use as Mother Nature always has the last say, but it's a start. We have a long way to go towards our ultimate goal and this past season we have experienced a few set backs along the way, but as we make changes and adjust the process to meet our needs, the goal continues to be towards increasing our sward of bentgrass.

The conversion to creeping bentgrass is going to take some time and effort but in the process we have altered our approach to how we manage the golf course, in turn we have reduced inputs and improved playing conditions and are heading in a direction in which I am confident.

For me as I look back on the Spring of 2004, I see it as a point in my career that altered my thought process as to how we go forward managing the golf course. In retrospect it provided me with a new direction and outlook on managing the golf course and an experience that I can say was clearly a turning point in my career.

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