

LAWN BOWLING GREENS

... Nothing but the best!

by
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It seems lawn bowling belongs in the domain of the "golden agers". No matter how hard the sport tried to rejuvenate itself, all its efforts failed to attract youthful participants, middle aged yuppies or even early retirees.

Driving through the suburbs one catches occasional glimpses of people dressed in their mandatory whites, rolling bowls across finely manicured grass, or sitting under umbrellas sipping sloe gins and balancing teacups. They may look content but when it comes to their greens they want the best. Nothing else will do.

Lawn bowlers require a perfectly level, smooth and firm green. The ball must never bounce as it rolls across the surface. Irregularities in the turf are simply not acceptable. Thus, a bentgrass green must not have any patches of *Poa annua*, crabgrass or even broadleaf weeds. Differences in elevation must be eliminated by means of scalping the high areas and filling the low areas. The turf on a bowling green is close cropped and thatch is not allowed to develop.

Construction

Like modern golf greens, bowling greens are now constructed almost exclusively from a sand mix, placed on a bed of tiles and a layer of gravel. Tolerances in elevation on the actual green are less than a quarter of an inch. The top mix is frequently pure sand with only a little organic matter added. Bowling greens must be firm, almost hard and, therefore, the emphasis is on high sand content. A bowling green measures 120 feet square, but can be larger, which is desirable to spread the wear. The green is surrounded by a 10 inch wide ditch.

The all-important consideration in lawn

bowling is the 'pace of the green', or its speed. On a bowling green, speed is expressed in seconds. The number of seconds for a bowl to roll 90 feet from its point of deliverance to where it comes to a rest is defined as its speed. A speed of 12 seconds is acceptable but for competitions bowlers require much faster greens. It requires greater skill and expertise to bowl on a fast green.

Soil compaction is a very common problem on the older bowling greens and aeration is the only means by which this can be corrected. After aerifying, the cores are removed and the green is toppedressed with a heavy application of sand. The sand must be brushed into the holes until they are filled. A steel mat is dragged across the green to spread the sand, thus filling the holes and at the same time raising the low areas on the green. This process may have to be repeated two or three times during the growing season.

Since most of the compaction on a bowling green takes place at the outer rim, it is not always necessary to aerate the entire green. Only the first thirty feet along the outside of the green needs to be treated. Bowling greens that are built on straight sand without soil amendments require aerifying much less frequently or not at all.

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On such greens the top layer needs to be punctured from time to time with a spiker or a mini-tine aerator.

To prevent compaction the rinks must be changed frequently so that the play is spread over the entire green. Another important factor in the prevention of compaction is to make sure that most of the maintenance work is done by people rather than machines. Thus, the steel mat used to spread the sand topdressing should be pulled by hand. In fact, if at all possible, use of machines such as garden tractors should be avoided.

Mowing

The height of cut on the bowling green is all-important since it, more than any other factor, determines the speed of the green. Any height over five mm usually means slow bowling and most good bowling greens are cut at 3.5 mm or less. Lawn bowling greens keepers frequently have the bed knives filed off on their mowers to reduce the height of cut still further.

The direction of cut on a green is diagonal to the direction of play, and it is changed to the opposite diagonal with every cut.

Double cutting, to increase speed, is practised before important events. Since there are no undulations in the bowling surface, the grass may be cut with the wider Australian mower. This mower has a 30-inch cut and usually is operated electrically.

It is best to remove the dew with a whipping pole or a squeegee roller before cutting. Removing the dew is also important means of disease prevention.

It is very important to keep the mower sharp. Its height of cut as well as its ability to cut paper should be checked after every mowing. The mower should be lapped with grinding compound at least once a week.

Thatch Control

The development of thatch is anathema to the bowler. Thatch results in a slow, sluggish green and must be prevented or

removed at all costs. The best method to prevent it is daily cutting at a very low height and regular topdressing.

Light topdressing with an acceptable sand every two weeks is an excellent method. After the topdressing is applied, a specially designed dragmat is used to work the sand into the turf. Again, the steel dragmat also serves as a means of leveling the green. Using a broom or dragging a piece of Astroturf across the green is not as efficient because both methods merely press the sand particles down instead of actually spreading them around.

If, in spite of frequent mowing and topdressing, thatch still develops, there is no recourse but to verticut the turf. Light verticutting can be done when the green is growing aggressively and when the turf is not under stress. After the green has been verticut it should be lightly topdressed. Never verticut or topdress a green that is under stress through lack of water or because of higher afternoon temperatures!

Irrigation

The perfection of automatic pop-up type sprinklers has made watering of bowling greens much easier. As on the golf course, many bowling greens suffer from too much water with all the accompanying side effects such as a soft, sluggish or thatchy turf infested with *Poa annua*.

Water should be applied only when the grass needs it and this is a matter of judgement often acquired only after many years' experience. The ability to recognize dying grass is an acquired skill learned on the job, not in the classroom. However, a tensiometer will help determine when more water should be applied. As a general rule, it is best to keep a bowling green on the dry side. It makes for a healthier green and more pleasurable bowling.

Disease and Pest Control

If a green is maintained properly and the turf is healthy, broadleaved weeds are rarely a problem. If a few dandelions or some plantain do invade, remove them with a knife rather than using a chemical. Small patches of chickweed can be removed manually using one of the Australian-made turf repair tools. For crabgrass, it is best to apply pre-emergent chemicals

in the fall of the year.

The most common fungus diseases are sclerotinia dollar spot and Take-all patch in the summer and snow mold during the winter season. For the first two, wait until the first symptoms appear and then apply either a contact or a systemic fungicide at prescribed intervals. For snow mold control, a preventative spray is applied in late fall and again when a mid-winter thaw occurs.

Insects are rarely a problem, but cutworms may appear after aerifying since they like to nestle in the aerified holes. An application of Dursban will generally put an end to this pest, but it must not be watered in since cutworms feed on the surface.

It is an excellent practice to wipe the dew from the green in the morning. This helps dry off the grass, scatters any worm casts, makes the grass stand up, and facilitates a firsthand inspection of the entire green. If this is followed by a cutting, the green will then be in good condition to greet the first bowlers of the day.

Small blemishes on a green can be repaired by means of sod plugs taken with a hole cutter from a turf nursery. These plugs should be at least three inches deep so they won't dry out. They should be placed at the proper depth so that the mower will not scalp them. Nor should the plugs be allowed to settle below the surrounding surface, since the bowls will be deflected by the hollows.

Occasionally, a bowler will drop a bowl while delivering it. This results in a deep pock mark, which can be repaired by using a ball mark repair tool from the golf course and brushing some sand over the damaged area.

The objective in creating perfect bowling conditions is to have a very firm, almost hard green, cut at a low height so that it has fast pace. A green with these characteristics will tend to have a brownish hue rather than a rich green.

Bowlers are a discriminating lot in their wants as golfers and, for expert bowler, only the best and the fastest greens will satisfy. They are willing to travel far and wide to find the perfect green, even if it means going to Australia.

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