Life At 3/16"
By Pat Gross, USGA Green Section

You’ve heeded the warnings and raised your putting green cutting height to 3/16” just like all the experts have told you. All the greens are healthy and it looks like you’re going to have a good summer. Just when you’re proud and confident of your accomplishments, the golfers start complaining that the greens are too slow. “Cut ‘em lower” they cry, “turn off the water,” “they need more verticutting,” and the ever popular “I don’t care what you do, but they better be rolling 10’ for the big tournament!” Don’t they remember all the disease and turf loss that occurred when you tried to keep them fast all summer?

Mowing at 3/16” is a prudent practice for creeping bentgrass/Poa annua greens during the summer. There is no doubt that the increased mowing height improves turfgrass stress tolerance during the summer, and yes, the greens are going to be a little slower. Instead of caving in to demands to lower the mowing height, there are several things you can do to improve ball roll and keep the turf healthy at 3/16”:

1. Keep ‘em Sharp — Greens suffer just as much from a poor quality cut as they do from an excessively low mowing height. Your mechanic should check the cutting units daily when they come in from mowing, and make any necessary adjustments. Weekly or biweekly back lapping along with checking the bedknife will keep the cutting units sharp at all times.

2. Proper Irrigation — Irrigation management is far and away the most important practice for maintaining healthy turf at any cutting height. With creeping bentgrass/Poa annua greens, the goal is to keep the soil uniformly most, but not wet. If you are on a leaching program to control salinity, go ahead and give the greens a good long soaking when necessary (4 to 6 hours) and then turn off the automatic system and go to hand watering for as long as possible.

3. Double Mowing — Consider double mowing your greens once a week. This is a good practice to improve surface smoothness without having to lower the cutting height. If you are short on labor, you can use a triplex mower in one direction and hand mow in the opposite direction, or even double mow with the triplex units.

4. Light Topdressing — If the turf is healthy and the temperatures are not too high, it is perfectly fine to apply light sand topdressing to smooth the surface. Many superintendents refer to this as “dusting the greens” with approximately 0.1 to 0.3 cu. yds. of sand per 1000 sq. ft. every two to four weeks. Topdressing should be suspended at the first sign of turf stress or if temperatures are expected above 90° F.

5. Grooming — Groomer attachments are great tools to improve the quality of cut and

Overly wet greens are slow, bumpy, and disease prone.

Continued on page 7