Scarsdale Golf Club occupies a challenging site with steep terrain and large trees. Steady agronomic progress over many years has greatly improved turf conditions.

SMALL STEPS LEAD TO BIG IMPROVEMENTS

Scarsdale Golf Club | Hartsdale, N.Y.

Matt Severino, Superintendent

Dave Oatis, USGA Agronomist

When famed golf course architect A.W. Tillinghast renovated Scarsdale Golf Club in the early 1920s, he described the property as, "one of the toughest pieces of land devoted to golf purposes." The difficult site challenged not only the architect, but all the superintendents that maintained the course in the years to come. Extreme changes in elevation, rock outcroppings and large trees conspire to create difficult growing environments throughout the property. When Superintendent Matt Severino was hired in 1992, he could see that there would be no shortage of challenges.

USGA Agronomists have been consulting at Scarsdale on an annual basis since 1964, and Severino dove into their old reports to develop a better understanding of the issues facing the course, the progress that

had been made and for help shaping his plans for the future.

“One of the areas that was a continued point of emphasis in the USGA reports was the need to improve our difficult growing environments. We had tremendous shade issues when I first started here,” said Severino.

USGA Agronomist Dave Oatis had recently taken over as Scarsdale Golf Club’s consulting agronomist. He and Severino developed a plan to selectively thin and remove trees over time, focusing on the most critical areas first. “The 16th green had some of the worst shade issues I’ve ever seen,” said Oatis. “Improving that area was beyond critical.”

In addition to addressing difficult growing environments, Severino and Oatis made plans to improve the drainage characteristics of the native soil putting greens. Installing subsurface drainage in all the greens and regularly performing drill-and-fill aeration over the course of many years set the stage for an important moment in Severino’s career.

“In spite of all our efforts, the predominantly Poa annua putting greens were having more and more trouble making it through each year,” said Severino. “We were putting increasing pressure on them, and finally we had a stretch of really bad weather in the summer of 2011 that pushed several greens to the brink of total failure.”

For many years, Oatis and Severino had discussed converting the putting greens to bentgrass to get more consistent and dependable playing surfaces. The time had come to put their plans into action. The conversion process involved weakening the Poa annua over the course of the 2012 season and then closing the greens for a six-week period in late summer to aggressively seed and establish bentgrass.

“Establishing bentgrass was one thing, keeping it was another,” said Severino. “I had to significantly adjust my maintenance practices to promote bentgrass and discourage the return of weaker varieties of Poa annua. Even the golf calendar had to change to accommodate a new schedule of cultural practices.”

After years of discussion and preparation, the conversion was a success. Every year since establishing bentgrass, Severino and Oatis survey the putting greens to estimate the turf populations. Before conversion, the putting greens contained less than 10 percent bentgrass. Today, that number is almost 90 percent. The increase in bentgrass has led to a dramatic improvement in both playability and reliability. Severino credits Scarsdale’s relationship with the USGA Green Section as having helped make that possible.

“The USGA Course Consulting Service has been helping with Scarsdale Golf Club for more than 50 years and Dave Oatis and I have been collaborating for almost 30 years,” said Severino. “That kind of continuity has played a huge role in the success we’ve had, and it creates a stability that the golfers and I can trust.”

“Improvements in course conditioning don’t happen overnight,” said Severino. “When I look back at some of our old USGA reports and see how far we’ve come, it reminds me how many incremental improvements occurred to make all that change possible. That’s where continuity and having a long-range plan really make a difference.”