



On The Dry Side

By Bob Vavrek, agronomist, Central Region

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A comprehensive member survey was taken at a highly regarded course recently, and it revealed that members with a 5 or higher handicap were relatively content with the overall playing conditions. In contrast, the course conditions did not meet any of the expectations of the less than 5 handicap players. The greens weren't fast enough, smooth enough, or firm enough. The roughs were too short, the bunkers had too much sand, and the tees and fairways were too soft. The obvious conclusion is that the few highly skilled players at the club are never happy with course conditioning even when the majority of golfers are clearly satisfied.

I noticed a similar "glass is half empty" attitude from low handicap players at a recent Turf Advisory Service visit. The new superintendent has done a great job keeping the course exceptionally firm and dry - a considerable departure from past management practices. Greens and fairways have been pushed right to the edge of moisture stress and it wouldn't be a stretch to say some of the playing surfaces had the appearance and consistency of Cheetos; you know, kind of orange and deep fried to a crackly crunch.

Considering that the two complaints expressed at nearly every golf course visit are (1) the bunker conditions are inconsistent and (2) the fairways are too wet and soft, I fully expected the golfers to be ecstatic about all the extra roll they were getting on the rock hard turf. Much to my surprise, it didn't take some of the mid-to-low handicap golfers very long to complain about those #!&* \$ hard fairways.

Many of their less-than-perfect drives were now rolling and bouncing into fairway bunkers; hazards they usually managed to avoid when the fairways were wet and soft. The prospect of having to execute very long sand shots to reach the greens has some players pining away for the good old days when the turf

squished beneath your feet. Fortunately, the majority of players look forward to the extra roll on fairways, though the jury is still out regarding how well they like the firmness of the greens. This experience supports the conclusions drawn from the aforementioned member survey; that some golfers are never happy.

By the way, there was one group of players who were quite vocal about what they consider to be significantly improved fairway conditions. Interestingly, it's a group that is usually hesitant to make any comments regarding course conditioning. You are correct if you guessed the ladies. Most don't have the same ability as men to drive the ball a great distance and really enjoy the extra roll when just keeping the ball moving down the middle of a firm fairway.

All in all, it was nice to see an old classic course being played as it was intended to be played. Golfers have the option to run the ball up onto the putting surface and a player who can put backspin on the ball has the advantage over the player who cannot.

There were still some gripes from members who believe the course must be emerald green to be healthy and that the grass is slowly being killed by the superintendent. No doubt, there will be some moisture stress injury to localized areas of turf dominated by *Poa annua* from time to time. Good communication can minimize the annoyance of a little dead turf. In any event, it was amazing to find that some of the old push up greens in shaded sites only needed to be watered once a week during midsummer as long as a little hand watering was applied in a timely manner.

Most superintendents have never taken the time or have not been given the opportunity to push the turf to the edge of stress with stingy irrigation. Keep in mind that an extra effort was made at this course to aggressively core greens, tees and fairways during spring and fall as a prerequisite to cutting way back on water. No doubt the extra coring improved root growth and reduced the potential for developing localized dry spots when irrigation was decreased.

Golfers at this club finally have what they claim to have desired for years - a firm, dry course. Whether or not they are willing to accept brown grass versus lush, green grass remains to be seen.

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