

Christmas Wish: Firm And Fast Fairways

By Brian Whitlark, agronomist, West Region

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News flash: the criteria used by *Golf Digest* architecture editor Ron Whitten to rank the top 100 courses has changed. The standard language used to assess fairway quality is no longer "lush and green," it is now "firm and fast." This simple change in semantics may prove to have a profound impact on fairway management tactics.

One such tactic to progress toward "firm and fast" fairways is sand topdressing. Sand topdressing was once a luxury that only high-end courses could afford. However, as the demands for excellent playability have increased, it has become a common practice at clubs throughout the southwest region. Sand topdressing improves surface smoothness and decreases plugged lies that can occur in areas with excessive organic matter and surface moisture. Eventually, routine sand topdressing improves the fairway rootzone, increasing the soil's ability to leach salts and reducing thatch.

The rate of sand applied per acre varies widely throughout the clubs in the southwest; I have heard of clubs applying 40 tons/acre divided into two applications per year and other clubs applying as much as 180 tons per acre on an annual basis. Ideally, one inch of sand should be applied within the first year of incorporating such a program. The program should then continue over successive years to build at least 5in. of sand on the surface. Clearly, the rate, timing and method of application will vary depending on the clubs budget, and topdressing needs. The following conversions are important for determining the volume or tons of topdressing sand needed to achieve a desired depth:

TOPDRESSING

Coverages in Cubic Yards and Tons/Acre

Depth (in.)	For 1 Acre in Cubic Yards	For 1 Acre in Tons (assuming dry sand at 0.72 cu yds./ton)
1/8	17	24
1/4	34	47
3/8	51	71
1/2	68	94
5/8	85	118
3/4	102	142
1	136	189
2	272	378

High quality sands are not necessary for improving fairway conditions, but it is important that the topdressing be free of gravel which can be unsightly and damaging to mowers. In addition, the sand should contain very little clay (<3%) and silt (<5%).

When considering fairway topdressing, be sure to communicate with your club officials the level of commitment a program such as this entails. Abandoning the topdressing program 3 years after its initiation would be a mistake and a waste of club resources. Moreover, it is important to communicate that visual benefits of such programs will not likely be seen until two to three inches of sand have been applied, which may take 3-4 years, depending on how aggressive the program.

As always, the Green Section staff is here for you and your golf course to provide the best possible playing conditions.

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