

Ireland Links—Firm And Fast Can Last!

By Larry Gilhuly, agronomist, West Region

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A recent vacation to Ireland once again confirmed that the Irish have it right. Their golf courses have shown that firm and fast conditions can be obtained in a climate that is nearly identical to the Pacific Northwest. Do they have secrets we don't know about? Not really, but with a few of their concepts in place, firm and fast playing conditions can be achieved in the Pacific Northwest. Let's take a look at how it does and does not apply to this part of the country.



Soil type. Unless your golf course is built on sand dunes created from a nearby river, you may have difficulty obtaining the same type of soil at your course. This is the primary factor that makes all of these courses different from the parkland courses found in the Pacific Northwest. Fairway topdressing certainly helps, but having 50-100 ft. of sand makes it much easier to create firm and well-drained fairways. One point for the Irish.

“Buggy” usage. Another fundamental philosophical difference between Irish links courses and most courses in the U.S. is the dislike for motorized “buggies.” While most of the links courses have had to at least allow limited power carts during the past few years to generate some additional income; they can do substantial damage if too many power carts are used. This is especially true during the non-growing season. Two points for the Irish.

No trees. No trees were noted on any of the ten courses I visited, resulting in full sunlight for all play areas. While this will not occur at most golf courses in the

Northwest Region, the simple removal of trees near greens, green surrounds, tees and fairway landing areas can have a major impact for drier playing conditions. Three points for the Irish.

Color. The overriding philosophy is not to be obsessed with color. It is this simple choice that truly sets apart Irish links courses from the typical American version of golf. The programs and economic realities follow.

Nitrogen use. The color green is synonymous with Ireland, but not on their golf courses. A real aversion to nitrogen exists on most links courses, which would otherwise play right into the hands of *Poa annua* and subsequent disease issues. Increased nitrogen promotes color and organic production, leading to more mowing, vertical mowing, labor costs and softer overall conditions. So how are they getting by with reasonable color without growth?

Micronutrient use. All of the courses had recently applied their greens with iron sulfate or magnesium sulfate or both. They use nitrogen only sparingly on the extremely large greens that generally are comprised of fescue, bentgrass and *Poa annua*. The results produce firm greens with minimal organic production and a golf course that plays fast, with balls often rolling 50 yards or more on well-struck tee shots. Green speeds are moderate, with mowing heights nowhere near what is found on our *Poa annua*-dominated greens. The combination of wind and severe contours makes for a more moderate green speed, a must if one wishes to finish 18 holes in a reasonable amount of time.

Sand topdressing. Although the greens receive just enough nitrogen to produce healthy turf, the amount of organic material they create is greatly reduced. This means that sand topdressing on a regular basis is less frequent than that found in our area, but just as important. Light sand topdressing mixed with organic material produce a firm matrix that requires more “bump-and-run” than “land-and-splat” shots.

Labor and budgets. Years ago, golf course superintendents figured out that a green golf course means that the grass is actively growing. Active growth means more mowing and more mowing means more labor and equipment. All of this green simply meant “spending more green.” With the cost of golf in Ireland very low for local players, there is no way that the color green has or should be the goal. Also, staff size for 18-hole courses ranged from 4-8 people. This can be done only by using the *less organic production approach*.

The goal in Ireland remains firm conditions at the lowest cost possible and accepting less than perfect conditions in all play areas. Now, wouldn't that be nice to have over here in a time of economic difficulty? The time is right – and so are the Irish!

Source: Larry Gilhuly (lgilhuly@usga.org or 253-858-2266).

West Region Agronomists:

Patrick J. Gross, regional director – pgross@usga.org

Larry W. Gilhuly, agronomist – lgilhuly@usga.org

Brian S. Whitlark, agronomist – bwhitlark@usga.org

Blake Meentemeyer, agronomist – bmeentemeyer@usga.org

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