

From Eh To Zed

By Larry Gilhuly, agronomist, West Region

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One of the great honors of working with the USGA Green Section for more than three decades has been the opportunity to visit golf courses in the country where my father was born – Canada. While Jack Gilhuly did not spend a considerable amount of time in Canada after his birth in Prince Rupert, British Columbia; his youngest son has truly enjoyed visiting golf courses throughout British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba. This update will be about the similarities and differences related to golfer expectations and golf course maintenance that I have observed between courses in Canada and the U.S.



Whether in the U.S. or Canada golf courses on both sides of the border are addressing the issue of excessive trees.

SIMILARITIES

The geography and climate of the northwestern U.S. and Canada varies greatly from west to east. Wet, mild climates with ample water in the west change to high mountain ranges then rapidly to high-desert climates as you move east until more mountain ranges eventually develop into wide, flat plains that stretch all the way through the Dakotas and Manitoba. As much as the geography and climate changes, the line that divides the two countries is just that – a line. The

climates are virtually identical; therefore, similar challenges are faced by golf course superintendents – especially winter stress. Let's look at some of the similarities that are shared by the U.S. and our neighbors to the north:

- **Weak grasses do not need a passport.** Due to the similar climatic conditions, the grasses found on golf courses in Canada are virtually identical to those found on golf courses in the U.S. In particular, *Poa annua* does not care about borders. It crosses the border without a passport while often wreaking havoc on playing conditions. This is especially true on greens, where another similarity exists between the U.S. and Canada.
- **Weak grasses love taking over shady areas.** A very good trend has been started in British Columbia that was noted in both Alberta and Manitoba as well. The sometimes emotional stance of saving every tree because they “make” the course is finally being overcome with the common-sense approach of selective tree removal to enhance playing conditions. In addition, planting trees to the east and south of greens is being avoided and smaller canopy trees are being used when needed. Still, this cannot overcome another trend that is found in the great white north.
- **Weak grasses dominate desirable grasses when mowing heights are too low.** The need for speed on low-cut greens and tight-cut fairways is not a prescription to promote bentgrass greens or Kentucky bluegrass fairways. *Poa annua* will happily invade over-stressed areas and will continue to expand into areas prone to shade, wet conditions or locations with too much thatch.
- **Overall golf course maintenance is not cheap.** It does not matter which country you're in, the cost of golf course maintenance is expensive.
- **Canada geese and American widgeons don't care about borders.** Both of these bird species follow the avian edict of “deposit and return.” Constant harassment, especially from the time work is done for the day until dusk, is the key to changing the edict to “no deposit and no return.”

DIFFERENCES

While there are many similarities among golf courses on the border, there are just as many, if not more, differences. Here are a few of the more notable differences:

- **Disease control is far more difficult in Canada.** The amount and types of disease-control materials available for use in the U.S. makes it much easier to protect *Poa annua* and other grasses from both winter and summer diseases. This also applies to growth regulation and seedhead suppression of *Poa annua* on putting surfaces.
- ***Poa annua* control is more difficult in Canada.** Just as there are more disease-control materials available in the U.S., there are far more choices in the never-ending attempt to control *Poa annua*. The latest example has been the experimental use permit granted to some U.S. courses allowing the use of methiozolin for *Poa annua* control. Methiozolin cannot yet be used in Canada.
- **Overall equipment costs are higher in Canada.** While there are numerous manufacturers of equipment around the world, the largest are found across Canada's southern border – the U.S. It is simply more expensive to purchase and maintain golf course maintenance equipment that must be imported. Furthermore, fuel is more expensive in Canada.
- **Finding and keeping good staff members is more difficult in Canada.** While the ever-expanding oil fields in the Dakotas and Montana are requiring a significant amount of labor, a similar situation has existed at Canadian oil fields for a longer period of time – especially in Alberta. This has effectively drained many good candidates for assistant superintendent positions throughout British Columbia and other provinces.

While the above represent only a few of the similarities and differences between golf courses in the U.S. and Canada, one topic related to the game that can be debated by both sides of the border – and both sides are correct. With the introduction of microbreweries all over the U.S., it is now a dead-heat on which country has the best beer. However, one topic is not debatable. When it comes to the alphabet, it ends with the letter z. Eh?

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