

Considering Rebuilding a Green This Year? Think Again

By Brian Whitlark, agronomist, West Region

February 1, 2016

It is common for two or three putting greens at a golf facility to underperform when compared to the other greens. In some cases, a few greens struggle to the point that turf is lost and the greens must be taken out of play. A reasonable response is to consider rebuilding greens that fail to perform, but rebuilding troublesome greens may not solve the problem. When courses have rebuilt problematic greens without reconciling other factors that are contributing to poor putting green conditions, the end result often is worse than before. There is nothing worse than rebuilding a poor green only to find that turf conditions have not improved a year later. Before jumping in to rebuild problem greens, spend some time investigating the following factors that may have led to the decline:



A majority of the time when greens fail it is due to a combination of three or more contributing factors rather than one underlying problem.

Growing environment - Spend most of your time evaluating the growing environment surrounding each green. The two primary considerations are [sunlight penetration](#) and [air movement](#). Each turf variety has its own light and air movement requirements and you must identify if either factor is limiting growth at each green. In some cases, adding a large fan or two can make all the difference between healthy and dying turf. In a similar note, removing a group of trees to open up a dense canopy and improve much-needed sunlight penetration

may be the answer. More often than not, modifications to the growing environment will prove more successful than rebuilding a green.

Drainage - A green without adequate internal and surface drainage is like a clogged sink – eventually it's going to stink and rot. Evaluate the collars – are they trapping water on the green? Eliminating [collar dams](#) is a relatively easy and inexpensive way to improve surface drainage. A green without internal drainage may not necessarily need to be rebuilt. Modern techniques to install subsurface drainage are clean and minimally disruptive.

Green design - Some greens are just poorly designed. Greens built with excessive slope may lack [adequate space for hole locations](#), or maybe the green was designed with only one way to enter and exit the green from a nearby cart path. In such cases, the green – or the entire green complex – may need to be redesigned in order to disperse golfer and maintenance traffic.

Profile management - Excess organic matter may lead one to believe the entire soil profile must be replaced. However, soil physical testing will help reveal the extent of the rootzone problem. Often times, the original rootzone material is in good condition and only the top 3-5 inches may need to be modified. Solicit help from a USGA agronomist when evaluating soil physical tests. Perhaps some modification to the aeration and topdressing program can improve rootzone performance.

Green committees often want to focus on one underlying issue that led to a dying green. However, in most instances, the demise of a putting green results from a combination of factors. Although rebuilding a poorly performing green may sound like a means to an end, do your facility a favor by taking a "CSI" approach and evaluating all of the agronomic and architectural characteristics of each green and its surroundings before making any decisions. For a more detailed discussion on this topic, please review the USGA *Green Section Record* articles, [Time to Rebuild the Putting Greens...Or Is It?](#) and [Troubleshooting Problem Greens](#).

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

[Information on the USGA's Course Consulting Service](#)

[Contact the Green Section Staff](#)