

Jim McConnell, Head Greenkeeper at Banbridge GC, County Armagh addresses the problem of thatch...

Thatch of the day

The reason for choosing this subject is because of the problems it can create in a situation where a course has a number of small greens (e.g. those around 250 to 300 sq. metres).

With the growing volume of traffic on our golf courses these days one must be constantly aware of the ever increasing volume of problems that may present themselves. If the management programme is not correct, consistent, and on-going then we may find our playing surfaces in trouble.

If greens are small they will obviously limit the number of pin-positions, thus during periods of extremely wet weather, and heavy play these greens will compact much more quickly. When compaction is severe this will reduce the supply of oxygen to the plant, therefore, no oxygen will pass into the soil for respiration but also no carbon dioxide will be capable of getting out. The result here is that grasses will choke in their own waste.

When this situation occurs the playing surface becomes soft and very susceptible to damage instead of remaining firm and true. The sward becomes poor, thin, and open to fungal attack, instead of remaining dense, healthy and resilient. The recuperative capacity is greatly reduced, therefore the sward will deteriorate even further where *Poa annua* is the predominant species.

If this situation occurs immediate action must be taken in the form of a very intensive aeration programme which of course must be on-going. This intensive aeration programme should be along the following lines;

- ensure good drainage is in

place e.g. that no surface water from slopes around greens is finding its way onto the green or greens;

- hollow-tine once a year at least if the thatch problem is a serious one;

- ensure material used for top dressing is consistent e.g. that sand is free draining, low in silt content, and of even particle size;

- verti-cut once every two weeks during the growing season;
- pencil-tine as often as need be during the playing season especially if play is heavy;

- ensure that mower units are cutting clean to prevent any infection entering the grass plant;
- feed only as and when necessary.

- water only when absolutely necessary ie, just before wilting point.

- ensure the soil profile is getting plenty of air throughout the playing season.

- all the above recommendations must be carried out as and when climatic conditions dictate.

Drainage is a vital aspect of good turf management, not only from the view point of keeping golf courses open through wet periods but also in enhancing free movement of water through the soil profile all year round. This will keep nutrients in circulation and increase the effectiveness of summer irrigation. Aeration relieves compaction and improves water penetration into and through the soil. It also restores the air/water/soil particle ratio and hence improves conditions for root extension. Although root growth peaks spring and autumn, aeration through the rest of the year is equally important to encourage new root.

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