

Life After Anthracnose

Tony Smith faced his worse nightmare and came through the other side a stronger man

I finished work on Friday evening on a high. It was mid August 2003 and I was pleased with the course and the way the greens were playing as they had all summer. Members and societies were both praising the condition of the greens and the course.



Anthracnose of *agrostis palustris* golf green

I returned to work on the Monday and checked the greens as usual. I noticed a touch of yellowing in the grass, but didn't think much of it until a few days later when I checked again, found and confirmed to my horror that I had got Anthracnose - *coletotrichum*. This disease was fairly new to me, I had read about it in magazines but took little notice of it until now.

I immediately set about trying to find out more about it by talking to friends in the greenkeeping world, various companies and on the Internet. They all said not to panic as sometimes it comes and goes without a problem. So I did just that and waited like a fool.

Well it didn't disappear, it got worse. The only way to describe my feelings at that time were empty and gutted inside; after so much praise of the greens and my biggest competition of the summer due in couple of weeks time, it didn't look good.

After a few days of deep thought and taking advice from some companies, I decided on a plan of action and set to work. To my surprise the advice checked the disease but not without the thinning of the sward on large areas of some greens. The competition came and went with very mixed feelings, some of sympathy, some of criticism, but rightly or wrongly, it cut deep. To my shock a couple of weeks later it returned with a vengeance, more alopecia and thinning out of the greens. I now needed to take drastic measures.

First I had to inform my Executive Committee of the situation and my plans, to come off the greens for the whole of the winter period. This did not go down well but they knew it had to be done if we had any chance of full recovery by the summer, hoping to have a good growing start in spring.

My staff knew we had an extra hard task to do, having to prepare winter greens to a high standard like we had never done, so that the members would accept our proposal. The staff did exceptionally well.

I kept the Committee and membership informed at all times of my plans, work, extra budget, results and progress of the situation.

My work programme started immediately by micro-tinning/topdressing for the next three weeks to help start root development and improve the putting surface on the greens until all competitions had finished.

On some of the greens the disease had checked, on others it spread rapidly over large areas of the green with very little if no grass on them. By the end of September the greens were in a very poor condition, with less than 60% of the grass remaining on some of them. By this time my name was mud, or some thing similar. With over 40 years experience and 20 years' loyal service some members still wanted my head on a platter. I had everything to lose, most importantly my pride. I set out to prove that I was good at my profession and got to work on the task ahead, with only six months to go and very little if any growing weather left.

Firstly I studied my past diaries for evidence of my work and fertiliser programmes to find out where or if I had gone wrong in my planning. To my surprise I found it. Over the years the greens had received less and less tinning work, one way or another. This I can only put down to allowing the window of opportunity to work on the greens to pass me by, probably because of the praise we had received over past years. So I think we did less work on the greens.

With the golfers requesting faster greens and the dry/hot drought conditions in summer 2003 and using more water on the greens than in a normal summer, the result was stress. The grass gave up the ghost and started to die on me. With this combination and a lack of foresight on my part, I blame myself for the condition of the greens.



Anthracnose of a *poa annua* golf fairway, with survival of *agrostis palustris*



Anthrachnose of a poa annua golf fairway

The first thing I did was to inform the Committee of my finding and if my theory was right the greens could be back in good condition by the end of May, given the weather/growth and my plan of action. I decided to go back to basics, starting with short tinning at first working my way down to as far as the machines would go (21ins).

The work plan was completed by the end of March; micro-hollow tined (4 times), micro-solid tined (3 times), earth-quaked 5in deep (twice), 5in x 3/4 in solid (twice), slit tined 9ins (heavy duty fairway machine), slit tined each week (green machine) and robin-daggered to 21ins every metre. This task took about five weeks and top-dressed five times between March and May.

When the spring came the greens had started to fill in but not as quickly as I would have liked, so a little boost of fertiliser was needed. People asked if we were going to over seed, I said not immediately but would do later if needed. In my experience the greens at Teesside are predominately poa annua greens and when managed well can and do produce excellent results.

By the end of May they had filled in and we could start to work to produce a good putting surface. What the golfers don't see is under the surface the roots. This problem will take years to put right as we all know and the spiking programme will go on for years to come.

The greens in the summer had been excellent. Each month we continued to micro-tine/top-dress during the summer with no complaints but it will take years to get the roots back down to a reasonable depth.

Throughout my 42 years in greenkeeping I have seen quite a lot of changes and problems but never have I had greens turn on me like this before. With all the modern machinery, fertilisers, chemicals, herbicides, fungicides, modern training, up to date information, etc it shouldn't happen. So what goes wrong, do we take all these modern things for granted and hope it makes our job better or easier? No.

Let's look at some of the problems in the industry at the moment, weather, climate changes, environment, Health & Safety, Committees, television, magazines and not forgetting the membership.

Weather and climate changes: This has a very important impact on the way we manage and present our courses; heavy spells of rain, long periods of sun/drought, last summer's drought. This all puts pressure on our staff and equipment. One day trying to make grass grow the next trying to keep on top of cutting.

Television and Magazines: The way we manage our courses and the way we should present them are being published more and more each year in every magazine on every golf tournament shown on TV. The members then expect to play on the same condition every day, which adds pressure to our jobs.

Environment, Health & Safety: This in itself adds extra pressure to our jobs. We have to do risk assessments of the course, machines, staff and chemicals for the members, the time this takes is not always taken into account but it is still expected that such tasks are carried out. More emphasis is now being placed on the environment on golf courses these days. We are expected to provide a happy living/playing environment for golfers and animals, our staff's safety/well being all year round and use the modern, technical and up to date equipment that is around these days.

Committee and Members: Over the years these have changed very little in the number of years I have been in this profession. Committee members still have to take complaints/suggestions from members whenever they socialise in the golf club or play golf. Some take it seriously, others take it personally, and all have different ways of dealing with complaints/suggestions. Most committee people have the golf club's interests at heart when doing this role and do a good job most of the time.

There are times when we don't agree on tasks or how they should be done. It's at these times when a clash of personalities usually gets caught up in the decisions that can cause people to fall out with each other and create a poor working environment for each other. Sometimes when this happens to me I take a step back and analyse the situation before taking action and think about their thoughts/ideas and mine then find a compromise to the problem.

Talking to the members on a daily basis and being friendly seems to help at our club. We get to know what they think of the course, the work being done, staff and Committees' ideas. All my staff acknowledge the golfers by a simple wave, greeting or a chat. It all helps moral in a difficult working environment in our working profession. I think people/golfers in general don't realise how difficult it is to work on a golf course.

Firstly it's the only sport in the world where people play their sport during the preparation of the sports areas (the course). This in itself is hard. Golfers of all ages and handicaps trying to play while we are in their way so why not try to ease the pressure and try to be friendly with everyone you come into contact with on or off the course.

I hope this article gives you a taste of the pressures we all feel at times and that you are not on your own when this occurs. If I had to give any advice it would be to tell you to talk about your problems and not bottle them up inside until a crisis is reached. Finally, remember your staff's feelings when you are under pressure. They will feel it to.

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Anthrachnose of agrostis palustris golf green