

Refining Golf Course Maintenance Practices — Have We Gone Too Far?

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“When against one’s will, one is highly pressured into making a hurried decision, the best answer is always no, because no is more easily changed to yes than yes is changed to no.”

Charles E. Nielson

Have you ever been in this situation? Does the request to have the greens 9’ to 9’6” on a continual basis sound familiar? If so, welcome to golf course maintenance in the 1980’s. With the advent of TV, golf played every week on nearly perfect golf courses peaked for the one week of the event. Regular membership players have become more demanding concerning maintenance practices that are sometimes questionable and, many times, detrimental to good growing conditions.

Have we gone too far in our golf course maintenance practices? Actually, there are two answers to this question. Yes, we have gone too far in some areas such as the great desire for “fast” greens on a year-round basis. In other areas we have not gone far enough, such as *Poa annua* control or *Poa annua* breeding and methods to reduce maintenance costs through breeding efforts.

GREENS

Undoubtedly, the main area of concern and emphasis in the maintenance operations must be on greens. The ultimate goal is to provide the best putting surfaces possible given the soil, turf type, manpower, irrigation system, etc. But, what does the word “best” mean? To some it may mean greens as fast as possible. To others the speed may be secondary to consistency and smoothness. Still others are completely satisfied with slower greens that are smooth and covered with grass. It is this area of putting green speed where pressure has been, and continues to be, applied.

How many of us have had the comment, “Make the greens as fast as possible.” This request is many times made regardless of the negatives effects that occur for actual growing of the grass plant. In some cases, it can be done due to the mild climate and lack of play. For example, Cypress Point Golf Club in the Monterey Peninsula area has a mild climate with only 13,000 rounds of golf a year. Under these conditions they have gone from a speed of 7’4” to 8’2” in 1976 to an average of 9’6” to 10’ in 1986. The only problem with this information is that very few, if any, clubs have this small amount of play; yet, those who have played Cypress Point come back to their home club and want the same results. This is simply not realistic and should not be the goal of the superintendent or club.

SPEED AND THE USGA STIMPMETER

In 1976, a new tool called the USGA Speedstick (Stimpmeter) was used to determine a standard by which putting green speeds could be judged. In 1976, the average speed of putting greens was 6’6” across the nation. The slowest greens were found to be approximately 4’11”, while the fastest were approximately 8’6” in the western United States. It is interesting to go back and review some of the speeds at various clubs in the western United States. For example, in 1976 the average speed at Seattle Golf Club was 7’6”, Broadmoor Golf Club was 6’11” to 7’6”, Eugene Country Club was in the 7’ to 7’1” range, while Waverly Golf Club was 6’ to 7’, Pebble Beach 7’6”, Los Angeles Country Club 6’9” to 7’4” and Cypress Point Golf

Club 7’4” to 8’2”! By today’s standards, many of these greens would be unacceptable. Personally, I feel a speed of 7’6” to 8’6” will provide plenty of speed for regular membership play and if more speed is desired, simple double mowing should be adequate.

When one looks at these readings and compares them to greens found today in the West, it is easy to point the finger of blame at the Stimpmeter itself. This is true to some extent; however, the blame can be equally shared by overzealous club members, green committee members, professionals and superintendents alike that have gotten into speed wars with neighboring clubs to have the “fastest greens in town”. As a result, we have seen an increase in moss invasion, disease and weeds on putting surfaces that are being mowed lower and lower with less and less nitrogen. It is time that golf courses begin to return to more reasonable speeds and healthier turf.

METHODS TO INCREASE SPEED WITHOUT LOWERING MOWING HEIGHT

There are basic programs that have been discussed for several years in regard to increased putting green speed without lowering mowing heights. The standard method many superintendents have used recently is a light and frequent topdressing program. A recent study completed at the University of Nebraska by Dr. Robert Shearman indicates that ball roll was significantly greater on turf receiving light and frequent sand topdressing than on those receiving the traditional aerification and topdressing treatment. In addition to this finding, there are other interesting ramifications from the light and frequent topdressing program. Basically, disease increased with the light topdressing program and became less severe when surfactants were used.

MOWING HEIGHTS AND FREQUENCY

Have we gone too far in our desire for “tight” fairways? If you are a superintendent in Kentucky bluegrass country, many times the answer is yes. However, I have seen some outstanding Kentucky bluegrass courses in the state of Utah that are consistently mowed at $\frac{3}{4}$ inch and produce some of the best playing conditions for fairways I have viewed in the western United States.

The key to their operation, however, is the fairways are mowed at least five times a week. This goes back to the question of what does the membership want and how much are they willing to pay. Mowing Kentucky bluegrass at $\frac{3}{4}$ inch five times a week will certainly give extremely playable fairways without problems of *Poa annua* and bentgrass invasion into the turf. To desire lower mowing heights with less frequent mowing is counter productive to proper growing conditions for this turf species. In a case such as this, the superintendent must relay the information to the membership and have complete communication so they understand the side effects of mowing height with this type of turfgrass.

In regard to other cool season grasses, it agains depends upon what the membership desires. Basically, a mowing height on fairways of $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{5}{8}$ inch will provide the best playing conditions for the entire membership. Mowing heights higher than this cut three times per week can many times result in “flyer” lies. This leads to the natural request of members to soften the greens as their downwind three wood, from a 1-inch cut fairway, using a Pinnacle golf ball, with Ping clubs will not hold the green. It is the responsibility of the player to stop the ball,

(cont’d. page 4)

(Have We Gone Too Far? cont'd.)

not the responsibility of the putting green! To help the player, the fairways should be kept below $\frac{3}{4}$ inch if mowed three times per week.

What about those courses that have gone under $\frac{1}{2}$ inch for fairway playing conditions? Provided the membership desires this type of playing condition and the club has adequate irrigation and mowing equipment, there is nothing wrong with this operation. A good example of this are the outstanding fairways being maintained by Mr. Bill Campbell at Sahalee Golf Club in Redmond. Superintendent Campbell is currently maintaining the fairways at $\frac{3}{8}$ inch with outstanding definition between the fairway and the $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch rough. While this mowing height may be too short for most country clubs, it appears to have been very well accepted at Sahalee.

SUMMARY

The golf courses most affected by the new trends in intensive maintenance practices to improve playing conditions are not the high priced country clubs. Those courses that have moderate budgets (or less) with memberships who desire the "country club" look are most affected by these practices. Private clubs with high budgets that use walkers on greens, triplexes on fairways, aerify fairways with walking putting green aerifiers, utilize modern computer-based irrigation systems, purchase and maintain good equipment and have adequate manpower certainly raise the level of maintenance on their courses. It is when members of the "smaller" clubs visit these courses

and return to their home course that problems can sometimes occur. On those courses that can afford it, many of the maintenance practices being done today are not too far. On those that can't, these same maintenance practices are completely out of the question. It is up to the superintendent to get this point across, using any means available, that golf courses simply cannot be compared and no golf course is in "perfect" condition every day of the year.

In an excellent article written by Mr. James T. Snow, Director, Northeastern Green Section Region, titled "Who said, The grass is always greener ...", he makes two important points. First, no golf course is identical to any other. Second, no golf course will *always* be in excellent condition.

If many of today's players sit down and ponder these statements, fewer problems would result from the inevitable comparisons.

Credit: Northwest Turfgrass Conference 9/26/85

North Central Turfgrass Exposition O'Hare Exposition Center Midwest GCSA Clinic

Wednesday, December 10, 1986

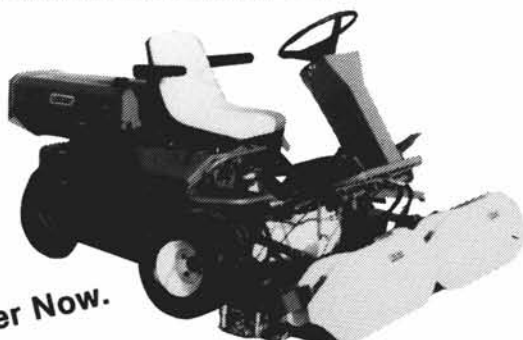
9:30 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.	Dr. Richard Hurley V-P Lofts, Inc. Seed for golf courses
10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.	Mike Matchen Supt., Wilmette G.C. Use of synthetic green covers
10:30 a.m. - 10:45 a.m.	BREAK
10:45 a.m. - 11:15 a.m.	Paul Boizelle, CGCS Supt., Onwentsia Club Teaching the children
11:15 a.m. - 11:45 a.m.	John Gurke Asst. Supt., Old Elm Club Clubhouse landscaping
NOON - 2:00 p.m.	Exhibit Tradeshow Visitation (Concession Lunch)
2:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.	Dr. Randy Kane CDGA/U. of I. Turfgrass Ext. 1986 Golf turf in review
2:30 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Alan T. Fierst Supt., Oak Park C.C. Winterizing the golf course
3:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.	Dave Mahoney Supt., Naperville C.C. Use of Embark in bentgrass conversion
3:30 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.	BREAK
3:45 p.m. - 4:15 p.m.	Leonard H. Berg, CGCS Supt., Village Gr. of Woodridge Staff productivity
4:15 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.	Dr. Clark Throssell Purdue University Putting green speed



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