United States Golf Association®
Green Section
Great Lakes Region

# A Short Wrapup of the 1989 Golf Season

**by James M. Latham, Director**
**Great Lakes Region USGA Green Section**

A recap of the 1989 golf turf season is difficult because it was so varied — from sheer disaster to disappointment to downright delightful, depending upon where you were at what time. It was a year of opportunity for many because of an apparent return to the usual Midwestern climatic patterns and for others because Mother Nature suddenly eradicated **Poa annua** in places few superintendents would dare to try.

At some time during the winter, golf courses from Michigan to Montana experienced classic winterkill of **Poa annua** and perennial ryegrass. This phenomenon can be expected locally in almost any year, but seldom has it been so extensive. The greater Chicago area, for example, missed the experience by less than 60 miles, but the six states to the north, east and west, were extensively blessed (?) with this cheap **Poa annua** control process.

It seemed to work this way:

- The soil was frozen.
- There was a thaw and the meltwater was retained at the turf surface (even with sand greens) in depressions, on gentle slopes or even flat spots where **Poa annua** dominated in the past.
- The temperature dropped suddenly to well below freezing.
- Ice formed in the saturated crown tissue of the bunch grasses and destroyed cell structure.

To make matters even worse for some superintendents, the thin green cover materials **did not** prevent damage. The only escapes in the epicenters of winterkill were greens (etc.) which retained snowcover or those covered with thick, excelsior mats.

Comments by superintendents who used covers:

- The thin covers may have aggravated the situation by broadening the day/night temperature spread.
- The thick covers probably kept the green surfaces from thawing.
- Medium thickness covers on top of a rather heavy, late, topdressing apparently gave enough insulation to prevent surface thaw or refreezing.

This situation was compounded by very poor growing conditions in early spring which defied attempts to reseed. Even **Poa annua** seed germination was minimal. The superintendents who persevered with multiple reseeding operations now have bentgrass in quantity where it has not been in a long time. By initiating maintenance operations which keep it competitive, they can use **Poa annua** suppressants to their best advantage. Otherwise, the spring miseries will return to plague them again and again.

Substantial losses of perennial ryegrass occurred in South Dakota and Wisconsin underlining their unreliability as a primary golf turf species in this latitude. They apparently need backup by Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescues or some type of more winter hardy grass.

There are, of course, exceptions to these loss patterns, but they were rare at the courses visited during Turf Advisory Service tours this year. In some instances, I simply confirmed the superintendent's statements that it was impossible to predict the episode and that normal maintenance operations could not prevent this kind of winterkill. It became evident that agronomics must play a larger role in golf turf management so that bentgrass can become more competitive to help **Poa annua** controls become more effective. Now that we have the means to suppress **Poa annua** aggressiveness, it is possible to reestablish bentgrass and/or Kentucky bluegrass in key areas, but it is imperative that they **compete** or the cycle will begin again.

Some other strange events took place this season. The sudden appearance of mini-fairy rings on the greens at a couple of courses was one. At about the same time, similar rings elsewhere disappeared after a couple of years in residence. Why? How?

The black layer syndrome hasn't gone away, either. The sporadic rainfall pattern had a great deal to do with this — probably. Soil oxygen is still the key to prevention and cure. Internal drainage and the elimination of spongy organic layers by aeration and topdressing are necessities. And remember that black layers aren't new. O. J. Noer commented on black, odorous soil profiles in greens over 50 years ago. They were just harder to see at that time.

Supplying the anaerobic organisms with oxygen by applying potassium nitrate or similar materials will help to reduce immediate damage, but that is simply treating a contributing factor and not the cause. The cause of black layer in sand, clay or stratified profiles is usually an excess of water. The noncapillary (drainage) pores or air spaces are filled with water. Buried thatch becomes a saturated sponge. Layers of anything restrict the downward flow of water which pulls air into the soil after it. And let's not forget that plant roots need oxygen, too.

It seems that more clubs are accepting their greens' Stimpmeter readings of 8 to 9 feet. A high percentage of the membership are enjoying that speed. There is also the realization that juicing the surfaces up to 11 feet from 9 for a member-guest event destroys the home course advantage. In other words, maybe speed-need is the figment of the imagination of would-be Tour-ists and not the will of the bill-payers.

There are, of course, clubs in which the majority of the members **want** tournament class greens at all times and are willing to pay for them. That's fine with me as long as they realize that fast greens are, necessarily, firm and that fast, firm greens should be accompanied by fast, firm, fairways and the level of management they require. The bottom line is a golf course that equates to 18 **very** large greens, mown at several different heights of cut, but with the same general maintenance procedures throughout. That includes vertical mowing or brushing to minimize the tee toward the green grain which comes from golf car use on fairways. This applies to both bentgrass and bluegrass. Banning golf cars from the fairways usually destroys

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the intermediate roughs, so unless these vehicles are limited to roadways, be prepared for higher maintenance costs or lower quality playing conditions. Golf cars are like taxes — we do not like them but we do like the revenue they generate.

Speaking of golf car traffic, have you noticed the damage being done by the concentrated traffic of maintenance equipment? Some of the wear is in non-play areas, but certainly not all of it.

The traffic problem continues to mount on practice tees, where few golf operations have adequate space. Even fewer can do anything about it except recycle the available area they have. This brings ryegrass to the forefront even though it is no more than temporary turf that will be destroyed in a very short time. The best results have been attained by "using up" strips of turf across the width of the tees before moving play to another strip. The damaged strip is then double aerated and the cores broken up, followed by heavy (15-20 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.) seeding and topdressing or just mixing the seed with the soil from the cores. Rolling and fertilizing finish the job. Fungicide treated seed minimize the danger of damping off until a systemic fungicide can be applied — at about the time of the first mowing.

If you want to turn green with envy, just see the creation at St. Andrews Golf Course in Chicago, under the care of John Lapp. Acres of bentgrass and ryegrass/bluegrass plus a 39-mat slab for night use. Real greens for targets and real sand in the bunkers. Or look at the Hinsdale Golf Club's sandbox practice area which provides such a wide variety of shots you won't miss using a driver. Bob Maibusch is rightly proud of this unique installation. There are other fine practice ranges throughout the Great Lakes Region but these are tops in their size classes.

A closing thought: If we are to keep bureaucratic regulations off our back, we must make them unnecessary. The way to do this is to stay ahead of the game through safe storage and application of chemicals, employee training and protection and a close look at our own operation as if we were an inspector who had never seen the place before and had not issued enough citations recently.

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## Positions Available

Need a Mechanic? Call or write to: Mark L. Anderson, 102 Oak Ridge Ave., Tampa, FL 33617. Phone Home (813)985-7560 or Work (813)972-3375. 3 years experience on golf courses and 15 years as mechanic. His wife is being transferred to the Chicago area.

Assistant/Foreman Needed: Send resume to: Bob Breen, Jr., Arrowhead Golf Club, 26W151 Butterfield Rd., Wheaton, IL 60187. Good benefits and retirement package.

Chicago Hts. Park District is interviewing for a Superintendent for a new 9 hole course to be open in 1991. Contact Dave Dunne at (708)755-1351.

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Steve Tedhams is moving to Forest Hills C.C. in Grand Rapids, MI. His assistant Jack McCormick will become the Superintendent at Calumet C.C. Congratulations to both men.