

To Cover or Not to Cover

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Ruffled Feathers G.C.

Green covers have been around for several years and are utilized by many golf course superintendents to minimize winter desiccation and other winter injuries. We have covered all the greens at Ruffled Feathers Golf Club for the past four winters. It is a very labor-intensive and capital-intensive process, and I have observed varying results over the four winters of experience down here on the South Side. During my rookie winter, I was intent on not using any covers at all. My reasoning was that I had worked at two golf courses that had been around for a very long time. At both of these courses were two very successful golf course superintendents that had never used covers and never had any real problems of turf loss because they did not use covers.

It was the Monday before Thanksgiving in the year of 1994. We had just finished applying our preventative snow mold control when the course owner, my boss, pulled up in his Jeep Grand Cherokee. I reported to him that we had just finished our application of snow mold control, and the course was ready for the winter. He then asked about the green covers. I replied that I had worked at two golf courses that were each almost 100 years old and had never used covers and had never lost turf. His reply to me was, "I spent \$40,000+ on greens covers, and I will not have these expensive covers turn into a \$40,000 rat's nest in those storage trailers behind the maintenance shop." Those were not his exact words, but for this article, I toned

down his speech so as not to offend anyone. After that brief conversation, it seemed to me that he would like me to use the green covers. Twelve days later, we had finished putting the last cover in place. The course was then ready for winter.

During that winter of 1994, the Chicago area observed a very open winter with varying temperature extremes. When we pulled the covers in mid March, I began to see the merits of covers.

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During that winter of 1994, the Chicago area observed a very open winter with varying temperature extremes. When we pulled the covers in mid March, I began to see the merits of covers. At Ruffled Feathers, the greens are pure sand, California-type construction

and severely contoured. During the winter, greens of this type of construction are subject to severe desiccation brought about by the dry, howling winds of our Chicago winters. I believe that if I had not covered the greens, we would have seen much more severe damage than with the covers on.

The winter of 1995 was open and cold. We had very windy periods of extremely cold weather. The challenge in 1995 was to keep the covers down. The frost was deeper than it had been in years. The covers were getting torn off daily. We tried to put them back on, but they would just be torn off again the next night. The sand greens were frozen, so it was impossible to pound the staples into the ground. The winds were so severe that the covers on five of our greens were shredded into several pieces. By the beginning of February, we pulled off the damaged covers and made no more attempts to recover any greens; in fact, we just pulled the covers off as the wind blew them off.

In 1996, we did not have as many covers to put out because we had lost five the year before, and we managed to cover all but four greens. We covered the greens that were most unprotected. The next spring, I noted that those uncovered greens had more desiccation and were definitely slower to green up than the covered greens.

As for the winter of 1997, we covered all the greens again. We did use quite a few more staples because we patched together the covers torn up in 1995.

With the unusual weather
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this winter, i.e., warm, wet, with snow cover that we have not seen for years, the covers have given us excellent color and the least amount of desiccation that I have seen since I have worked here at Ruffled Feathers. I have been scouting daily throughout the season to monitor for any snow mold activity. As of February 28, we do not have any on our greens and tees. The big question now is when should we pull the covers? The greens are nice and green, and there has been quite a bit of growth. If I had the labor available, I would pull the covers, mow the greens, spray them again, then recover them. But I do not have that luxury and will continually monitor the greens daily and pull those covers when my gut feeling tells me to do so.

Here are some factors that other superintendents use in their management of green covers:

Julius Albaugh, CGCS, golf course superintendent at Westmoreland Country Club in Wilmette, Illinois, uses green covers on two USGA spec sand greens and the practice tee. Dad states that it is not necessary to cover the older push-up greens. At Westmoreland, they pulled the covers on their greens on February 11. He said that the greens that were covered do not look any different than the greens that were not and says that they will not cover the greens again because they have hardened off. He believes that the main benefit is seen in open winters when the covers prevent desiccation. He also stated that he is an old-school superintendent, and as far as he is concerned, the jury is still out on

the benefits of green covers. He added that he is not so sure that some superintendents don't use covers as an excuse to keep people off the greens during the off-season. Now, I find it hard to believe that any of Chicagoland's fine golf course superintendents would do such a thing.

Dave Behrman, CGCS, golf course superintendent at Midlothian Country Club, used covers at the course this past season on tees that they sodded during the first week of October. Dave pulled the covers off on February 23. He stated that he could not see a single seam on the tees. When they mowed the tees, they hauled away a Cushman-load of clippings. When at Riverside Country Club, Dave said that he would cover all the greens because of the predominantly high population of

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Poa annua. At Midlothian C.C., the bentgrass population is much higher, and he feels that covers are not worth the large investment. Dave mentioned that he discovered the advantages of covers while at Riverside when they covered four greens one year and heavy rains set in. Then the temperatures dropped. The following spring, the covered greens survived while the greens that were not covered were severely injured by crown hydration, and many of those greens did not fully recover until mid June. Dave also stated that during open winters, covers do prevent much desiccation.

Tim Davis is the golf course superintendent at Shoreacres. Tim has used covers in the past but has not covered the greens at Shoreacres for the last two seasons. Prior to that, Tim covered all the

greens for six years in a row. Interestingly, Tim's reasoning behind the use of covers was to heal the greens in after late fall aerification. At Shoreacres, they used to aerify in a conventional manner, that is, before Memorial Day and after Labor Day. As a result, Tim felt that he was doing a disservice to his membership. So with this in mind, he went to the board and presented the cost of the covers along with his proposal to aerify during October. The thought was that after aerifying with 5/8 -inch tines and then heavy top-dressing the covers would allow for a more rapid recover or filling in of the holes. Also, if the holes did not fill in, the covers would minimize most of the desiccation. Now during the past two years, Tim has used deep tine aerification. He stated the difference is the hole spacing and the fact that you are not removing any turf (plugs) enables the greens to fill the holes

in and recover more rapidly. In closing, Tim did state that he is considering the use of large 3/4 -inch vertidrain tines that would pull up cores and require the use of heavy topdressing to fill these holes. If he decides to go that route, he will indeed use the covers again.

Al Fierst is the golf course superintendent at Oak Park Country Club. Al uses covers on exposed greens or greens that have a problematic history. He does not cover greens that receive sun and /or historically have had no problems. He usually covers the greens around the first of December, or whenever the weather sets in. This year, Al pulled the covers February 9. When he got back from Anaheim, he inspected the covered greens and found some active snow mold in shaded areas. The

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greens nearest oak trees that were shaded had developed disease; and yet, on greens 20 feet away where the sun hit the greens, they would be fine. At Oak Park C.C., Al also used covers on some tees. He covers the first tee and all of the par 3 tees. He states that inevitably some golfers must hit balls during the winter, and the first tee would always take a large beating. Also, golfers like to hit balls to a target, which is generally the green. He used to put snow fence and

ropes around the par 3 tees and to the par 3 greens, but then members thought it was a great sport to hit balls over the snow fence. In closing, Al said the use of covers helps the tees to regenerate turf and also effectively discourages and/or shuts down unwanted play!

There are many ways to skin a cat, and you must decide what works best for your situation at the course where you work. I believe that this little article offers insights on covers and the many different thoughts

and uses of covers from some successful superintendents in the Chicago area.

In closing, I would like to thank Tim Davis, Al Fierst, and last, but not least, my father for their thoughts, insights, and time. ■

Director's Column
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ways of soliciting copy, but they all involved some form of coercion. I'm still new enough at this that I believe coercion isn't necessary. Everyone of us has had something happen to us that the rest of us would benefit from knowing. C'mon, share with the rest of the class. The strength of this association is the willingness of its members to help each other. Put something down on paper or call Fred with some news for the "the Bull Sheet." If Fred receives it by the first of the month, it'll get in the next month's issue.

Thoughts from the Pasture:

I am not a turf manager; I am a golf course superintendent. My professional efforts are not designed to grow grass; in fact, a lot of what I do conflicts directly with best management practices of turfgrass culture.

My job is to provide golfers with a place to play their game, and a well-maintained putting surface is a far cry from the ideal turfgrass environment. I have heard it said that we golf course superintendents are the only agronomists that grow their crop to its detriment:

We aren't looking for high yields, and our harvest isn't measured in bushels.

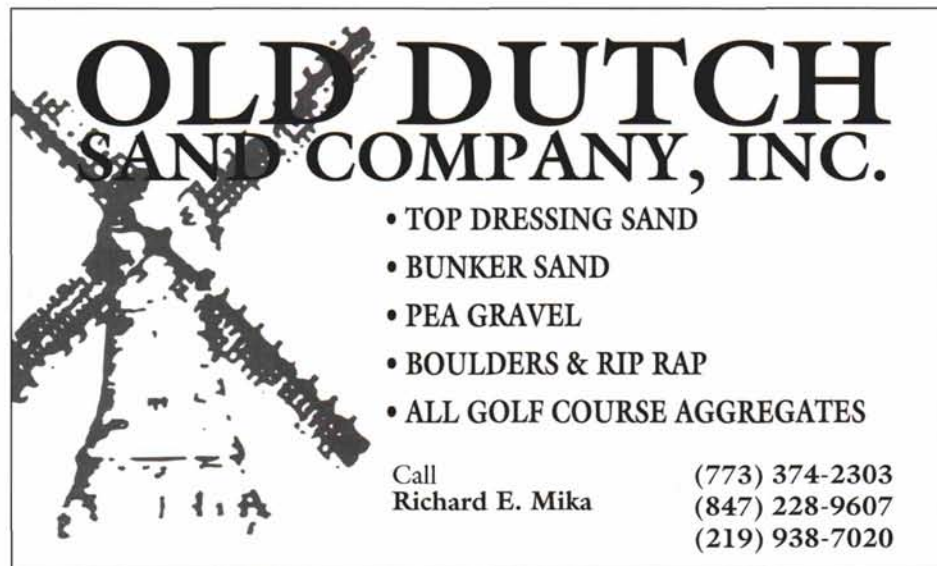
We subject our fragile crop to stresses that keep us awake at night all for the good of the game:

- We mow our crop daily at heights measured in hundredths of an inch.
- We often mow when it's wet because it's the only time we can do our job.
- We roll surfaces that are already compacted from foot traffic that is funneled to one 4.25-inch spot.

• These surfaces are regularly subjected to footwear studded with spikes that are longer than the height of the turf (thankfully, this practice is rapidly losing favor among gentlemen and ladies).

• We don't irrigate the crop when it needs it; we often have to wait until it is on the verge of wilt.

We do these things not because it's good for the turf; we do them for the good of the game. ■



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