

Too many anxious golfers can quickly ruin the greens when they do not appreciate that walking on wet soil can lead to serious problems.

During the winter months, superintendents reeeeeally need to protect the greens from traffic damage that could have lingering effects through the following spring and summer.

## If Golfers Only Knew, They Would Play the Course Backwards

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Sometimes, Mother Nature makes a turfman wonder if there is any justice in this world. Two years ago, the winter winds from Canada were so cold superintendents with older greens lost a significant amount of *Poa annua* due to direct low temperature kill. This winter, El Niño is keeping us so warm that courses are once again having problems. This year, however, the damage is somewhat self-inflicted, as it is being caused by too many anxious golfers who do not appreciate that playing on dormant greens can cause serious injury.

Discussing winter play with golfers suffering from a long bout with cabin fever can become emotional if the facts about turf damage are not clearly communicated. The reason is that golfers reeeeeally want to play when the mercury rises during the winter months and superintendents

reeeeally need to protect the greens from traffic damage that could have lingering effects through the following spring and summer. Also, some golfers find it upsetting when their home course simply cannot afford to employ full-time personnel during the winter to accommodate them when odds are the weather will only permit play on just a few eight- to nine-hour days between Christmas and St. Patrick's Day.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume that there are personnel at the course to collect green fees from winter golfers. In such a situation, there are two important points that should be considered before letting the golfers play on the greens. First, the extent of turf damage that could be done depends heavily on the number of rounds that could be played during the entire winter season. If the discussion were about three or four golfers playing on a handful of sunny days during the winter season, then the potential for damage would be minimal. If the

discussion were about a few hundred rounds from late December through early March, then the golfers would literally wear out the turf in its dormant state.

If the greens are severely damaged by excessive wear during the winter, a superintendent would be forced to fertilize as soon as the turf begins to grow in the early spring. For golfers, the cost of a few bags of fertilizer might seem like a small price to pay for the privilege of playing all winter. Unfortunately, the price to be paid includes much more than fertilizer and has nothing to do with currency. According to research conducted by Dr. Ralph Engel, early spring fertilization on damaged greens promotes excessive *Poa annua* seedhead production.


Ah, but what if the course was fortunate enough to have creeping bentgrass greens? Not to worry; creeping bentgrass subjected to abnormal wear during the winter months quickly gives way to *Poa annua* because it cannot compete against the seeds lying dormant in the soil that germinate before the greens have a chance to heal.

Second, the type of soil used to build greens and how well it drains has a great influence on the extent of damage done by winter

golfers. When golfers walk on wet greens during the winter, they leave faint footprints in the surface that disrupt ball roll. True, newer greens built in accordance with USGA® specifications are less prone to winter damage than older greens built with an amended soil because they drain faster and are, therefore, usually firmer. However, having USGA® greens is not a green light for unrestricted access in the winter because less damage does not equal insignificant damage. Would anyone feel better about a deep scratch on the side of their new car if you said, "Look on the bright side, at least they didn't put a big dent in your new car?" I doubt it.




To remove footprints left by winter play, greens must be aerified and top-dressed in the spring. For golfers the inconvenience of aerification and top-dressing might seem like no inconvenience at all, since superintendents say they have to aerify and top-dress in the spring anyway. In reality, it is not so easy. Superintendents normally wait until after the turf has started growing vigorously in midspring before they aerify and top-dress so that the holes will heal quickly. This means that greens damaged by winter play would be bumpy from opening day through late April or early May if the regular maintenance schedule is followed.

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Ah, but why not just aerify earlier? For one thing, the holes would not heal as quickly and the greens would still be bumpy. For another thing, the superintendent would have to fertilize early to help the holes heal and that would, you guessed it, encourages *Poa annua* seedheads.

Agronomically speaking, there is one statement that sums it up: Winter play is bad for the turf, bad for soil and, therefore, bad for the golfers in the long run even though they may not appreciate it in February. If the price of winter play is *Poa annua* invasion, bumpy putting conditions and early aerification, where is there safe middle ground? It is easy. Stay off the greens and play the course backwards using the tees as temporary putting greens. This solution gives golfers a chance to stretch their legs during the winter and gives superintendents the opportunity to properly prepare the greens for the regular golfing season.

When is it best to bring up the topic of playing the course backwards? Possibly the best time is during the week of the U.S. Open Championship. When the best players in the world are rolling long putts over the glass-like greens of the Olympic Club, which golfer would object to saving the greens for the best time of year? ■



*Placing the tee markers on a level area in front of the greens will guide winter golfers around the course when it is set up backwards.*



*Using the tees as temporary winter greens will give anxious golfers the chance to stretch their legs without sacrificing good playing conditions during the spring and summer.*



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