



Roughing It, The Right Way

I hear it a lot, out here at Stonewall Orchard Golf Club in northwest Lake County. "How do you get your roughs so thick?" Or, "You must really pump up your rough to get it to look like this."

I believe the roughs are as important as the rest of the playing field. We all spend countless hours taking care of the greens, tees and fairways. But think about the average player. If he is lucky, 25% of his game is in the fairways. For the most part, he is in the edge of the rough or "deep in it." Why not give him the playing surface he needs?

In truth, I don't pump it up. Our rough is the product of a lot of hard work from the crew and persistence in maintenance practices. Many years of experience and trial and error have taught me what does and doesn't work. Having seen both sides of the industry, public and private golf, it becomes easier to anticipate what golfers will and will not do (or mostly will not do). All this background comes into play on the establishment and maintenance of the rough.

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I will start with the development of the rough first. With strict financial constraints during construction, we had the choice of either a high-end bluegrass or 4" sand mix on the tees. The tees were my option and that is where we decided to place the money. So we opted for an average bluegrass mix. This mix consisted of a blend of 35% Abbey Kentucky bluegrass, 35% Viva Kentucky bluegrass and 30% Victa Kentucky bluegrass. This blend was significantly cheaper than the other premium blends we could have purchased.

We started seeding in the middle of summer 1998. There was no sod to be used on the course during construction. Once the area was graded and ready for seed, we applied a starter fertilizer at the rate of 2 lb. of N per thousand. Seed was then applied at the rate of 5 lb. per thousand. All hillsides, bunker edges and green banks were covered with Futera blankets. We laid more than 160,000 yards of Futera. Just a note here: if you are going to lay Futera blanket, do not overlap the edges. I can still see today some of the places we overlapped.

At this point, we started watering. I was taught to keep the grass like a rice paddy the first week. And so I did. With God's help, we had several timely rains and the roughs started to take off. We mowed the rough that fall with a 72" outfront and an 84" National starting at 2.5. In November, we did a dormant feed of the rough with some 32-5-7. It was the cheapest N with some P and K that we could get.

Starting in the spring of 1999, we decided to mow the rough with a rotary. This would be our primary mower. Growing the course in, we fertil-

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ized with 32-5-7 at 1 lb. N four times a year: May 1, June 10, August 30 and November 10. We supplemented the thin areas with 20-6-20 at the rate of 1 lb. N on July 15 and August 15 and 0-0-60 at 1 lb. potash on June 1 and September 1.

Opening in July of 1999, we realized the need to control carts in the roughs as well as around the greens. Having no curbing, we placed many large boulders at critical points in the path to keep traffic from cutting these corners. We then placed rope and posts around the course in strategic places. The ropes would herd the carts to the path near the greens and break up traffic patterns in the rough areas. The use of a rope approximately 15' long to disrupt the traffic flow is all you need. The first season we moved the ropes twice a week. This was to reduce any traffic pattern that would form.

During all dry spells, we had a person dedicated to running sprinkler stands. It was critical to maintain these areas with irrigation. With a double-row system, most of the irrigation barely reaches the cart paths. It is necessary to provide adequate irrigation cycles in the far rough areas as well. We had a dozen stands and more than 2,500 feet of hose. We ran one to one-and-a-half-hour cycles. This was enough time for one person to move the stands around the entire course. Our roughs were filling in nicely. We

observed excessive wear in the late fall when most of the grass had gone dormant. This was due to heavy play and low temperatures. There was no time for the turf to recover.

The second season, we fertilized the same as the first. We increased our rope and post supply and started to move these on a daily basis. If you keep the carts from traveling in the same path on a daily basis, you can drastically reduce the wear areas. During this season, we reduced our height of cut to 2.25". We bought a second rotary rough mower and started to cut roughs one-and-a-half to two times a week.

That fall, we sodded bare areas along the paths and wear areas. The wear areas were stripped, aerified, then sodded. Laying only 2,000 yards in these high-traffic areas was sufficient. We continued with the supplemental applications of 20-6-20 and 0-0-60 in the heavy-traffic areas. We felt our plan of attack was working.

Starting in the 2001 season, the height of grass was taken back to 2.5". We reduced the fertilizer to 0.75 lb. N applications instead of 1 lb. N. We saw a significant drop in the weed populations as the turf density increased. Now we are realizing a reduction in our costs with less fertilizer and fewer applications of weed control. During the fall of 2001, we did see signs of dollar spot in the

rough areas. While it was a season of high pressure, I felt we were at the edge of where we needed to be for fertility. Any heavy-traffic areas again were treated with supplemental applications of 0-0-60 and 20-6-20.

With continued daily movement of the ropes, the wear areas and traffic patterns were kept to a minimum. In the fall, we sodded wear areas. Aerification is the key to preventing the sodding of the same areas from being an annual event. While some always will need this due to various problems, not all the areas have to be. Stay on top of rope movement, watering needs and fertility levels to keep these areas to a minimum every year.

The 2002 season we mowed at the height of 2.5". We used a 25-5-15 fertilizer at the rate of 0.75 lb. N, three times during the season with the fall application done in November. We continue with the supplemental applications of 20-6-20 and 0-0-60. We have logged a tremendous amount of hours running sprinkler stands and moving ropes. But it all pays off, as I am always asked how we keep the roughs so thick. The answer: dedication, team effort and hard work. Hats off to my crew, mechanic and assistant; without their hard work and effort, none of this could be possible.



One secret behind Stonewall Orchard's lush, playable rough: the strategic use of ropes to control cart traffic.