

## FEATURE ARTICLE

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# 2007 – You Are Not Alone



*One of the keys to succeeding in the business of golf course management is the ability to adapt to change. The unpredictability of the weather, new chemistries for the prevention and control of turf diseases, and the development of improved turf cultivars are just a few of the reasons that golf course superintendents need to continually evaluate and adapt their management programs.*

Over the course of the year I had the opportunity to speak informally with several golf course superintendents (GCS) about their experiences this year. While most of us are willing to share in casual conversation, I got the hairy eyeball when I pulled out my note pad, so I promised to keep names out of this article in order to encourage the free exchange of information. I offer up these comments and observations (in italics) with the following caveat; they are not meant to endorse any product or commercial process beyond that of one person's experience. Take them for what they are worth – food for thought.

First of all what happened this year? Weather, like politics, is local, but with very broad brush strokes here is a brief synopsis of 2007 in the Chicagoland region.

The agronomic year began for most of us in February around the time of the Golf Industry Show. While we were enjoying the Southern California sun between seminars and meetings, the Midwest went into the deep freeze following an unseasonable warm spell in January.

High winds whipped whatever remaining snow cover off the ridges and windward slopes of greens. Some golf courses suffered turf loss in those areas due to the desiccation caused by frigid, dry winds.



*Repairing a spot damaged by flood waters with harvest cores on a golf course fairway.*

**Comment — GCS (20 years experience)** *"I use greens covers on my greens. It's like an insurance policy, 90% of the time they really don't do much, especially if there is decent snow cover, but this winter was one of those 10 percenters – grass at greens height does not like extreme fluctuations while dormant, and we got that in February. The covers help soften the extremes and we came out in the spring OK. I'll bet that anyone who lost grass this winter lost it on the bare slopes and high points and didn't use covers."*

The golf season began for many of us in mid-to-late March, as usual. The weather was spotty and unremarkable except for a cold snap in early April that had some of us questioning our timing for a growth regulator application to suppress *Poa annua* seed heads. This has been something of a crap shoot over the years, and it's hard to nail down definitive timing of the application.

**Comment — GCS (14 years experience)** *"I've had little success suppressing *Poa* seed*

*heads with Proxy and Primo at heights of cut higher than collar height. I don't make a fairway application anymore."*

Spring and early summer were the calm before the storm, so to speak. Periodic rains and higher dew points began to

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carve into fungicide budgets earlier than expected, but on the whole most of the Chicagoland area was spared any significant meteorological curve balls.

Late June was when things began to get a little salty. Higher than average temperatures prompted the following post on Tom Skilling's weather blog on July 31:

"Heat has expanded its grip on U.S. weather and is still spreading as August 2007 gets underway Wednesday. Chicago's 91° Tuesday, the hottest here in three weeks and the 11th time highs have reached or exceeded 90° this year at O'Hare, was but one of myriad 90°+ temperatures scattered across 42 of the Lower 48 states. Wednesday marks the fifth day Chicago's temperatures have increased. Peak readings surged from 80° Saturday to 85° Sunday, 89° Monday and 91° Tuesday. Hot as Wednesday's predicted 93° high is, it lags behind the 99° on this date a year ago. With the three-month meteorological summer period now 2/3's over, the season ranks 12th warmest since O'Hare Airport observations began in 1959.  
<http://blogs.trb.com/news/weather/weblog/wgnweather/2007/07/>

with O'Hare Airport averaging 4.25 inches of precipitation during the month. We got four times that amount in Mount Prospect and my conversations with GCS around the six county area indicate a general pattern of three distinct bands for rain totals: South of I-55 had 12-15 inches, between I-55 and I-90 had 7-12 inches, and north of I-90, well past the state line, had 16-21 inches. Obviously, local amounts can vary greatly. O'Hare's official total was 15.85 inches from June through August. We got 16 inches in August, alone, just 10 miles away from O'Hare. The point is that the area was deluged; flash floods were a daily threat; and golf ground to a halt.

**Comment — GCS (20 years experience)** "We were \$40,000 up over last year's numbers and finished the month \$20,000 behind, a swing of \$60,000. August is a bad month to lose here."

The rainfall continued to arrive in buckets, saturating the ground and causing root mass, already depleted from normal summer wear and tear, to recede even more.



*Don't forget the localized dry spot that popped up seemingly a few days after our heavy rains.*



*Can you say dollar spot? Fairway dollar spot trials show off the disease pressure that never seemed to end.*

Still and all, the summer was not unusually trying. Hot and humid in July is where the rubber meets the road in Midwestern golf course management.

**Comment — GCS (21 years experience)** "I tried Dimension as a pre-emergent crabgrass control for the first time this year. It must have been a good year for crabgrass because we missed an area we've been having trouble with and it was wall-to-wall crabgrass. The treated areas were clean."

**Comment — GCS (20 years experience)** "I don't take care of my lawn. I have 150 acres of grass to take care of, and the last thing I want to do when I get home is yard work. Come by the house and see my crabgrass garden."

Then along came August.

August is historically our wettest month of the year,

**Comment — GCS (25 years experience)** "I have roots about 1/2 inch long. We still had to get out and try to mow the playing surfaces between the raindrops, and the mowers are compacting the saturated ground. Grass is lazy, it only works as hard as it has to to get water, and there's been plenty available right at the surface. My fairways are so hard I can barely get a stake in the ground."

On August 23, a front moved through the area bringing near hurricane force winds and, of course, flooding rain. Ground that was saturated for over two weeks provided no foundation for the onslaught. One hundred year old trees were virtually torn out of the ground by the wind. The Village of Mount Prospect estimated that one quarter of its street trees were lost in the storm. The clean-up continued past September 15, and that was just for the trees and branches that fell. Aerial

work continues today. Some areas dodged the brunt of the storm, but nobody escaped unscathed.

**Comment — GCS (15 years experience)** "I've never seen so much fairy ring, and since we couldn't get out with the mowers the rings got extremely hairy."

**Comment — GCS (41 years experience)** "I put 2007 as one of the top five worst in my career. Tough winter, hot, then all the rain."

We still have a long way to go before we can put our courses to bed for the winter, and many of us are adapting our fall cultural calendar to cope with the after effects of the soggy summer. Most common among the plans are later and more frequent aerification and supplemental fertilizer applications with fewer nutrients per application at more frequent intervals.

**Comment — GCS (20 years experience)** "I switched to 3/8 inch tines for greens coring a couple of years ago. We use the carbide tipped ones from that specialty catalogue. They don't wear down and pull a clean plug. The cores close up a lot faster and I use less sand to fill them."

No two golf courses are the same and no two golf course superintendents manage their turf the same way. There are many routes to the same destination, but the following comments relate to one requirement we all share, especially in trying times.

**Comment — GCS (15 years experience)** "My board and greens committee are definitely better educated about golf course management than when I started. I'm sure it has to do with the information I give them via e-mail and newsletter communications. Even though we are out dealing with dead grass they love me more now than when things are perfect. They understand what we are going through and are very supportive."

**Comment — GCS (24 years experience)** "It's definitely the strangest year I faced in the business. Now is not the time to establish lines of communication. Best to do that before the seeder is out on the bare areas."

The book is not closed on 2007. I asked everybody at some point what they were glad to have done to get through the tough times.



**2007 Photo Quiz: Grubs, who has them?**  
The answer was easy, anywhere you didn't spray in 2007.

**How many times can you push up sand on the same bunker in a month stretch?**

**Comment — GCS (10 years experience)** "I started to inject acid in my irrigation water to get the pH under control. I haven't made a granular fertilizer application of N all year. The nutrients that were tied up in the soil are releasing and things are really green. I'm surprised since my roots are almost nonexistent."

**Comment — GCS (20 years experience)** "I'm taking my aerification cores out to the low areas that drowned and spreading them. Heck the grass is well and truly dead, so if any of the plugs catch they may survive over winter. I did the same in part of my nursery. I call it my 'heritage' blend and it works well for patching existing bent/Poa turf."

**Comment — GCS (14 years experience)** "I switched from beer to whiskey."

Close the book on 2007.

Good riddance

**-OC**

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