

## FEATURE ARTICLE

David Marquardt, *Dirt-N-Turf Consulting*

# Pay Me Now, or Pay Me Later



*New channels created yearly  
and backfilled with sand.*

*In the '70s there was an oil filter commercial that featured a mechanic in his garage overhauling an engine. He stopped his work long enough to hold up the oil filter of choice and tell us that had the owner of this vehicle simply changed the filter every time they changed the oil, then they wouldn't be overhauling their car.*

The slogan for that oil filter company was, "pay me now or pay me later." And pay we do. Every time we think we can take a short cut, or scrimp on solid maintenance practices, we end up paying for it. Indeed the old saying in horticulture is true: "we never have time to do it right, but we always have time to do it twice."

If any one of us found our shop technicians ruining engines by skimping on filters or other simple maintenance practices, we would soon be looking for a new technician. Yet, over the last few years it seems that we have done some of the same in our horticultural practices. As an industry, we have altered sound practices to fit the needs of the pro shop or greens committee, while putting our greens and jobs at risk. Too many outings and the ever increasing need for revenue have created a situation where the cart is now leading the horse.

Let me add a disclaimer. If this is not happening at your course, great! If you are able to maintain adequate playing surfaces without allowing the profiles to deteriorate, great! If you are a good communicator who has taken control of horticultural practices and schedules at your course or club, great! If this does not pertain to you, great! Unfortunately, we saw more profile issues this year with more seasoned superintendents whose jobs were on the fence than ever before. And, almost to the course or club, the problem resulted from altering sound cultural practices to meet the needs of the pro shop or greens committee agronomist.

We might well argue that the cause – the record setting rains with high temperatures – created the effect – deteriorating green profiles. However, courses that have maintained proper core aeration and profile modification felt little if any of the same effect. The problems we observed were most prevalent on the courses that tried to get away without "disturbing" play;

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those courses that skipped thatch and compaction removal; those courses that topdressed regularly but failed to core out the old and replace with new; those courses that began rolling but have failed to understand the increased need for sand topdressing and profile management that rolling demands. In most cases, but not all, the real "cause" was straying from what we know are sound cultural practices.

It is also important to note that while both sand and soil greens felt the pressures of this season, it was the soil greens that suffered most. The absence of a place and a method for properly draining the amount of rain some courses received has nothing to do with the conditions referred to above, and we do not mean to imply that it does. As stated earlier, these conditions are course/club specific and generalized management statements are not intended.

Now, don't look for the next paragraph to provide the answers, because they are not that simple. Each course or club has its own politics and requires the superintendent to communicate with his or her upper management in order to satisfy the

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needs of all. Many superintendents and owners/managers found the need for drastic fall and spring profile recovery tactics that will cost more in terms of work, sand, and player inconvenience than the inconveniences of proper maintenance. (Not to mention the stress on the superintendent/management relationship.)

Profile management is not a matter of **if**; it is a matter of **when**. Suppliers are offering newer, cleaner, and quicker tools every year that do in a few hours what used to take days. These new tools allow us to do smaller modifications more often with quicker healing than tools our predecessors used.

Many other factors such as water quality, fertility, expectations, and capabilities play into the scenarios described above. I would also add that as greens age and change, so must the management techniques we use.

When it comes to profile management, I offer the following: be careful when asking your colleagues for cultural advice. Yes, we undoubtedly have some of the best superintendents in the country right here in Chicago. But that is not the point. The point is that the variability of soil types, sand cap amounts, sand quality, turf variety(s), water quality, budget, equipment availability, staff

(numbers and ability), club expectations, fertility practices, internal and external drainage, design characteristics, shade, wind exposure, play levels, and more, all contribute to making quality cultural decisions. For many clubs, too much has changed over too many years to continue to do business as usual. Some

courses are better off harvesting cores, while for others it is a foolish removal of quality sand and organic resources. Ten or twenty years ago, similarities were the norm. Today our conversations need to swing to the unique challenges that each of our clubs and courses offer.

Regardless of the size of the bookstore, there is no textbook that can properly address the unique situations each course offers. There is no substitute for education and experience; that is why we have careers and not jobs. Our clubs count on us to be the experts they hired, which as we know, includes educating the pro shop, as well as ourselves. No, it is not easy. No, this review will not change your

green chairmen's mind about the fall golf schedule. What I hope it will do is to bring to light some of the difficulties facing many of us, so that we can take the precautions that prevent it. **-OC**



*Channels are capped on top when coring practices are abandoned.*



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