

## MIDWEST BREEZES

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### “So What Do Golf Course Superintendents Do in the winter...in Seattle?”

In the Midwest regions, when people find out that we are Golf Course Superintendents, the number one question we always get asked is, “what do you do in the winter”? Our courses are for the most part closed and the ground is often frozen and/or covered with snow. We work on indoor stuff or work outside pruning trees and shoveling snow.

There is one part of the country that grows cool season turf varieties (also known as the poa annua capital of the world) and continues to play golf in the winter. This most unique place is the Pacific Northwest (PNW). So what goes on with their golf courses during the winter months?

After the GIS in San Diego, I flew north to the “megapolis” of Seattle/Tacoma/Vancouver B.C. area to further investigate this question.

Now we all know it rains a lot in the PNW. Seattle was known as the suicide capital of the U.S. because of the ever present dreary, rain, fog filled days, day after day...depressing. Most of the precipitation comes during the winter months. The rain/snow can vary anywhere from 30 to 350 inches a year depending on specifically where in the Seattle area a golf course is located. The Olympic Mountains have the ability to create “rain shadow” with the frontal systems coming off the Pacific Ocean; however, when it doesn’t rain, it can be very pleasant. By pleasant, I mean like mid 50’s and sunny. For us “snow people” coming from a sub arctic environment to a place where it is 50° and sunny, is quite warm and comfortable. For the sun starved locals, whenever the sun does peek out, they come outside to play in droves and the golf courses are packed. Many of the hard core golfers just pack their gore-tex and go play in the fog and drizzle, just a normal day in Seattle. If you wait for the sun to play golf, it may be a long

time coming. The weather forecast can be very predictable. Kind of like the opposite of San Diego predictable. Instead of sunny and warm it’s cold, gray and drizzly. So if you live there and you want to play outside, you “just do it”. Now you know how Nike (based in Portland, OR) came up with their famous catch phrase.

In a “normal” winter in Seattle, usually the biggest problem for golf courses is the chronic and ever present management of pink snow mold or fusarium disease. The turf growth also slows down a lot but it still needs to be cut, just not as frequently. The turf stays emerald green year round, there is no dormancy. The challenge is to find the window to cut when

the turf is not saturated and there is no standing water. Most of the crews are running at near full capacity. Golf course project work is also a common winter practice. Tree removal is an ongoing battle at any golf course and they grow some pretty healthy specimen’s of Douglas Fir and other very tall conifers that create ultra dense shading of entire holes. Many courses continue to topdress their fairways, which has been a common practice for the last ten years or more to promote firmer



soil conditions and to discourage earth worms. Of course drainage projects are revealed and implemented as the soil and turf becomes water logged.

This winter was very unusual in the PNW. They had some extended freezing weather in the single digits in December that killed many of the poa annua greens. Any turf that was weakened from the previous summer got hit hard. There were even reports of pythium outbreaks last summer, also very unusual. The normal temperature range typically doesn’t get that hot or humid. Their poa never had a chance to harden off like our

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hardy Midwest varieties usually do. Most of the winter kill damage was on poa in shallow rooted areas on greens or weak drainage areas and along drain lines. The winter kill damage was widespread across all different kinds of courses across the entire PNW all the way up and down the coast. Very few courses were spared some sort of damage.

Joel Kachmarek at Tacoma Country Club along with many other courses lost many parts of his greens. They mow the poa pretty low (around .110" summer and .150 winter) and the short rooted, short leafed plants couldn't handle the extended freeze. He is trying to stimulate re-growth of the poa by making light frequent applications of fertilizer and raising mowing heights. Many other courses got "whacked" and are playing on temporary greens. Joel has a major sewer line project that the city is installing along the perimeter of the property. The Members are not used to the greens being anything other than perfect. Communication, outreach and a past "track record" have been critical for Joel's plans to move forward.

John Alexander at Fircrest Country in Tacoma also lost some of his greens. He just recently took over the Superintendent position so he is fortunate the green failure didn't happen on his "watch". John is taking the same curative tactics as Joel, using temporary greens as needed, light spoon

feeding, raising mowing heights and communicating the challenges. The poa will grow back like it always does. Time and patience are going to be required.

Larry Gilhuly, N.W. Regional USGA Turf Advisor has been very busy making course visits. He has been writing newsletters and trying to keep everyone informed and "calmed" that this is a regional, abnormal phenomenon and that no one did anything "wrong". Everyone is trying to figure how to prevent this problem in the future. There are no easy answers.

I attended a breakfast club meeting of a group of Superintendents from the Tacoma area. They discussed everything from disease management, fertility, winter mowing, topdressing, budget cuts and project work. The main topic of conversation was the abnormal 2009/2010 winter kill of the poa annua. I always find it amazing I can sit and talk to Superintendents from any-



where in the world and we always talk about the same stuff. That's what Turf Nerds do.

Kelly Donaldson is the Superintendent at the Home Course in Tacoma. The Home Course is a public course owned and operated by the Pacific Northwest Golf Association and the Washington Golf Association. This location is the home of the Northwest Golf House, a similar concept to our own C.D.G.A. Golf House. The Hudson Bay Company had a trading post on the site in the early 1800's. It overlooks Puget Sound. There is speculation the traders laid out a crude six hole layout around the fort. This would make it the oldest golf course west of the Mississippi. Kelly will be hosting the qualifier rounds for the U.S. Amateur being held down the road this summer at Chambers Bay. He has T-1 Bentgrass greens with very little poa invasion and interestingly enough, his greens did not sustain any damage.

Sean McDonough of Broadmoor Golf Club in Seattle took his lumps as well. His damage was more of an overall thinning of the poa as opposed to large dead areas. He is still playing on a handful of temporary greens. He says some of the clubs are starting to look at rolling out the sod cutters and replacing significant areas of greens.

Paul Collieran of The Members Club of Aldarra, a "slick" newer Tom Fazio designed course had only slight freeze damage to some of his lower drainage areas in his fairways. He still has a lot of bent in his greens. The course is located about an hour east of Seattle and has some nice, pretty rolling terrain. Aldarra features ryegrass fairways and tees, pretty much the standard for all new courses out there.

David Wienecke, Superintendent of Chambers Bay in Tacoma is gearing up for hosting the very prestigious, U.S. Amateur later this summer. It is located on a beautiful site adjacent to Puget Sound looking out toward the Olympic Peninsula. Chambers Bay is owned by Pierce County and is managed by Kemper Sports. David is working on adding a few tees, improving the practice area and removing Scotch Broom a noxious weed. Chambers Bay is a true links, public course built on an old sand/gravel mining pit. It is a Robert Trent II design, featuring fine fescue as the playing surface everywhere. It is a walking only course as the fescue is very sensitive to vehicle traffic. Chambers Bay was designed and built to host major championships. Links golf requires a different approach to playing the ground game and it will be a great challenge for the players. They are scheduled to host the U.S. Open in 2015. If you get a chance, this course is very unique and is a "must" play. You could play Chambers Bay in Tacoma and then head down the Oregon coast to play the courses at Bandon Dunes. You could play links golf without making the long overseas flight to the U.K!

Although normally the Pacific Northwest is not a typical destination for golf trip it does offer some unique possible options. It is one of the few places you can go golfing and alpine skiing in the same day. That ever present precipitation makes for a good snow base. Be forewarned, you won't find the champagne powder like you do in the Rockies; it's more like a cascade concrete. **-OC**

