

DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

Chuck Barber, St. Charles Country Club



The Message

As I write this I am watching lightning flash and thunder roar. The good news is we needed a little bit of rain to aid in recovery and to water in topdressing sand. The bad news is that we didn't finish topdressing and with four greens that haven't been topdressed still to go the question is: will we be able to finish? More than any other year, 2012 forced me to examine, re-examine and re-re-examine each decision I made as a superintendent. That didn't include just scrutinizing the management of the golf course agronomically, chemically and culturally; that also included managing our staff, our equipment fleet, and myself much more carefully.

Record heat, humidity, drought, severe thunderstorms, mechanical failures, turf stress and the need to be on-site more than a typical year leads me to ask if I was trying to do too much. All of us feel, in one way or another, pressure to maximize the golf course and minimize inputs: Firm, fast greens and clean playing surfaces free of debris, divots and excessive traffic stress were my focus this year. We all know what our challenges are from golf course to golf course. The choices we make in managing each property is what makes each golf course different and excellent in their own way.

I entered the month of July of 2012 feeling very good about the prospects for the rest of the summer. I left July with damaged turf, slower, softer greens and the prospect of having to recover from a July second only to 1921 in high temperatures. When it became apparent that the long-term forecast for July was going to be 'challenging', I made a decision to change up as much as possible to save stress on our turf. Further, we switched the staff's schedule to keep them out of the heat as much as possible. We worked from 5 a.m. until noon straight through. We began alternating mowing and rolling greens, we abandoned sand topdressing

for a few weeks and we did what every salesman likes to say: We doubled the rate and shortened the interval. In short, we made a great many changes in our normal routine so we didn't do too much.

The price we pay for this is a changing golf course something our membership had to adjust to on fairly short notice. I communicated via email, clubhouse posting, newsletters and through committee and board reports to send an important message. That message was that we were going to adjust our plan based on the cards that we were dealt and the resulting playing conditions would change, albeit temporarily. I knew first hand that doing too much in the challenging environment we were experiencing could have disastrous results. I erred on the side of healthy turf and while we experienced slight to moderate turf mortality (I don't lose turf, I kill it. I can see it, I didn't lose it. It's right there, it's just frikkin' dead. Thank you Brian Sullivan for that nugget.) in some areas, we are healthy over 99% of the golf course. The mantra I repeat to our membership, their guests, the staff and club management is that you can do more with healthy turf than with stressed turf.

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My guess is we'll hear some horror stories through the grapevine about grass dying on area golf courses. I'll dispel any mystery: Grass is dead today here. Some of it was my fault and decisions that I made were either incorrect or wildly incorrect. I don't intend to make those mistakes again. I will learn from them and I CERTAINLY don't want to make the front page of Dr. Derek Settle's "Weekly Scouting Report" for physiological decline two weeks in a row again. More of it was grass that never stood a chance for a variety of reasons we all can relate to: poor drainage, air movement, and sunlight. We communicate the need for these components of a turfgrass system and we live with the choices we make alongside our employers. The message is simple: The more of each, the healthier the turf.

I think we'll all enjoy the rest of this year and begin to recover, enjoy a bunch of aerification and resume many of the cultural practices we might have skipped during 100 degree weather. Heck, we might even play golf again? I was somewhat successful in getting that message out and educating our membership about the consequences of severe weather coupled with poor growing environments.

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The trick is to have a willing audience eager to learn and to understand the challenges. Many of us aren't lucky enough to enjoy a surplus of understanding employers, customers, and members. Sometimes the stress only escalates even after the heat subsides. One of the reasons I love writing for *On Course* is to learn more and understand what is happening at each course in the area so I might pick up a trick or two and improve things for my current employer. I encourage each of you to contribute as much as you can to the magazine because you might learn something about yourself and help others reading your content at the same time. **-OC**



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