



United We Sand

TOPDRESSING IN THE MIDWEST OF AMERICA

Chuck Barber, *St. Charles Country Club*

PHOTO CREDIT: MATT HARSTAD

For two years I was the Editorial Chair for *On Course*, and for two years I sought member driven content. I was marginally successful, but we all have demands on our time that preclude our sitting down and formalizing what we do into two pages of coherent content.

Further, I didn't follow up well with the membership to make sure that the content came in on time.

Fast forward to the MAGCS Board of Director's strategic planning meeting on November 28, the notion of hiring a 'staff writer' to collect content and generate articles came up. This got me thinking.

What if I collected a few blurbs of content from members on a variety of topics and wrote the articles myself? All I would need would be boatloads of free time and, well, a variety of topics that I hadn't identified yet. It was in this spirit that I began to collect some information on sand topdressing from the MAGCS membership and to write the article myself. I don't have boatloads of free time, but I know I can do this. It's my sincerest wish to bank a great many articles on a variety of topics throughout the winter, so that when the time comes *On Course* can continue to provide industry-leading content in one of the best magazines any GCSAA Chapter has to offer. Any of you reading this should now be warned: I will contact you asking for information on yet-to-be-named topics and will further ask for editorial license and the public use of the information. So, now you know I will be pestering you even more than I already do.

The information I gathered led me to believe that although methods, frequencies, equipment, material handling, loading, and deployment varied a great deal there were some significant commonalities. The goals of each topdressing program seemed to revolve around organic matter management,

thatch dilution, and putting green speed consistency and smoothness. "Our biggest goals are thatch dilution, green speeds, and maintaining a firm surface," says Matt Harstad, superintendent of Calumet Country Club.

Kevin Goss of Sugar Creek Golf Course believes that thatch dilution is the most important of his topdressing goals. The greens at Sugar Creek (or Sugar National to those of us that have been there) were built with a 1:1:1 mix of sand, soil, and peat. While that might not appear to be the best root zone, Kevin says the greens are unusually healthy. He credits this to more than adequate surface drainage. As a result, the greens are relatively problem free.

Sand selection revolved around 'what we've used here in the past.' Shane Ritchie of Schaumburg Golf Club explains, "I don't know if there was any logic behind it (sand selection) originally, but there was no reason to change it." Fines free sand from any source was the most important criterion, as well as delivered cost.

"There are times that I wish we could afford dry sand, but that's way too expensive and we don't have any place to store it," Matt Harstad reported. Material handling, delivery, and application time seem to be the biggest obstacles. Aside from storage of various kinds (parking lots, railroad tie and cinder block bins, to cart paths), finding the time to get out on the golf course is always a concern.

"The biggest challenge is finding a window of opportuni-

ty," Goss says. Sugar Creek is a dawn-to-dusk, nine-hole operation. They are not enthusiastic about the idea of blocking off tee times in favor of cultural practices. At the same time, Mother Nature has to provide the right weather, so doing one small thing means a great deal has to go correctly first.

Imagine that you've found the right sand, the right equipment, the right opportunity, and the right people. How often are you going to topdress? Scott Goniwiecha of The Glen Club says, "I like to topdress greens, tees, and approaches every two weeks weather depending."

Shane Ritchie further explains, "Our program is basically every two weeks in the growing season for thatch control and

John Gurke, CGCS at Aurora Country Club, has a wholly different philosophy. "The heavy sand application we make in December is still present throughout the early spring months (March and April). In late April we typically contract DryJect service which provides another heavy dose of sand that persists into early summer. For the summer months we might only topdress two or three times lightly." Gurke goes on to explain that they will follow the growing season with either another DryJect or core aeration.

Gurke also says, "We find that there are no layering issues when not lightly topdressing every week or two, and our quality of cut throughout the summer is much better than when we were topdressing more frequently."



Incorporating sand with the T.B. 200 Brush. Photo Credit: Chuck Barber

ball roll consistency. Twelve tons in a very light application over six acres of greens, brushed in with the T.B. 200 brush." Coco mats, pull-behind static brushes, and rotary brushes were the preferred method of incorporation. The consensus also is to use "sand" mowers, or back-up machines, for 2-4 days after each topdressing.

"After we mow, I always use an old set of mowers for three days. This, combined with a few heavy watering cycles eliminates any issues with quality of cut," Goniwiecha explains.

Kevin Goss agrees with this schedule. "You can't just throw a lot of expensive sand around and automatically topdress your way to good soil." Soil modification is not a goal at Sugar Creek, but rather thatch management. "I don't think it wise to build a sand layer on heavy soil. After 10 years you might be in good shape, but in the interim you will have a perched water table and short roots. Everyone likes their new topdressing machines.

The preferred methods of topdressing are either dedicated or pull-behind twin rotary spreaders. According to Dave Blomquist, CGCS, 15 years ago the machines that we have today weren't available. "We used walk-behind fertilizer spreaders with bagged sand. It was the only way to get the light, even application we wanted." Now, with computerized spreader settings, a wide range of sand depths available, and easier loading, topdressing is much easier than ever before. Former NFL Coach Herman Edwards once said, "A goal without a plan is a wish." Each superintendent identified their individual goals for sand topdressing and formulated a plan to make it work. It is safe to say that sand topdressing is a major component of their golf course management strategies.



Everyone likes a new topdressing machine. Photo Credit: Chuck Barber