

Going Undercover



PHOTO CREDIT: DON CROSS, CGCS

Chuck Barber, *St. Charles Country Club*

We've all seen the perfectly square tarps covering greens from a variety of viewpoints. We observe their presence or absence from perimeter roads around area golf courses. They can be seen from a bird's eye view while we fly overhead to and from local airports.

For some, they can be seen comfortably from the relative warmth and comfort from our offices in the winter months if you are a superintendent who chooses to cover greens (all or some) over the winter.

Ben McGargill puts the greens at Wynstone Golf Club 'undercover' for the winter months. "Anything that is primarily *Poa annua* gets covered. Prior practices were to only cover greens adjacent to water because it is windier. There were still problems with ice damage on other greens. We tarp everything on the golf course now."

For 23 years Don Cross, CGCS at Skokie Country Club has been going undercover. The benefits Don realizes include protection from desiccation, wildlife damage, pedestrian traffic and winter sports enthusiasts.

PHOTO: BEN MCGARGILL



One of the many covers that go down each fall at Wynstone help to protect the *Poa annua*, especially on shaded sites.

That's just the tip of the iceberg for Cross as far as covers are concerned. Don is a strong proponent of deep-tine aeration late in the fall or early in the winter months. This practice provides some space for freeze and thaw expansion. Further, Don sees a noticeable increase in early spring root growth from this process. Finally, the greens at Skokie Country Club are in top form earlier than they would otherwise be. The soil temperatures reach optimal levels for root growth and shoot growth undercover.

McGargill also indicates that going undercover has taken away most of the winter stress on the *Poa annua* populations at Wynstone. "The only turf loss we have had in the winter has been on little lobes that do not get covered on the edges of the greens. Bentgrass is fine, *Poa* sometimes has issues."

Both McGargill and Cross agree that it is not a problem free enterprise. "The covers we use (permeable) certainly do not solve all potential winter issues," says Cross. The covers at Skokie will allow water from rain or snow melt to infiltrate which can complicate things. Further, they do not provide protection from ice accumulation, damage, or fungal pathogens like *Microdochium* or *Typhula*.

Manpower and storage are also a concern for those going undercover. "It takes a staff of six people 30 minutes per cover. The entire process takes roughly 10 hours," McGargill notes.

"The Cover Shuffle" is how Don Cross characterizes the biggest challenge for Skokie Country Club going undercover. The shuffle starts when "the warm days in spring may come sporadi-

cally and are then followed by sharp temperature drops.” Cross manages the temperature fluctuations by removing and the re-installing the covers periodically as the weather dictates. “We have to manage the temperatures so as to not let too much early spring growth to occur too soon. Further, we can’t uncover them too early and cause a fallback in progress (enhanced growth, greening) made to that point. Therefore, we may pull them off for brief periods and put them back on if the temperatures dictate this”. Cross notes that 2012 was an exceptional year in as much as the covers came off March 13th and there was no need to reinstall the covers.

McGargill agrees that their biggest challenge going undercover is “putting them on and taking them off.” Storage is another obstacle as the covers take up a lot space but if dried adequately they fold readily and don’t require heated storage. The replacement interval, for McGargill, is roughly every 7 or 8 years. “They become brittle and tear easily at that point. We have been replacing our worst two tarps each year. That pace will quicken in the near future as half of our tarps were purchased in 2009.”

PHOTO: BEN MCGARGILL



McGargill in his words is not an “active advocate for covers” but he realizes the myriad of problems they mitigate each year at Wynstone as easily seen in the picture above.

Dan Marco, CGCS at Ruth Lake Country Club in Hinsdale chooses to go a different route. While not necessarily ‘burying’ greens in sand, Marco eschews covers in favor of very heavy topdressing to protect the putting surfaces at Ruth Lake from the

PHOTO: BEN MCGARGILL



As with most maintenance practices, the “cover shuffle” as Don Cross likes to call it is dictated each Spring by fluctuations in temperature. 2012 was easy, once they came off, they never went back on.

winter weather. Marco will solid, deep-tine (to the tune of 9” deep) aerify the first week of November and use approximately 60 tons of sand to backfill the holes.

“Just to put them to bed I use 3 semi loads (60 tons) over 3.7 acres of greens, collars and minor extensions.” The entire undertaking takes 2 staff members, a TyCrop brush type topdresser, a large Dakota material handler and about 3 hours of time.

According to Marco, the first mowing of the spring is not as bad as you might think with the volume of sand he applies. “We get about three mowings in prior to needing to sharpen reels. Further, we use older units to make the first few mowings and only greens are dry of morning dew.” This method has been successful for the A1 putting surfaces at Ruth Lake since they were grassed in 2005.

Whether or not superintendents choose to send greens undercover for the winter is a function of many variables: does the grass require it, does the growing environment demand it, are the covers in the budget, is there space to store them, is there adequate manpower to handle them, and much more. @

PHOTO: DAN MARCO, CGCS



Dan Marco, CGCS prescribes 60 tons of sand to cover all his putting surfaces each fall at Ruth Lake Country Club. He really likes the outcome each spring on the aggressive A1 cultivar.