

The Gator Growls

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Over the years, much controversy has arisen over this topic and the controversies are varied:

- To topdress or not-
- Mixed to straight materials-
- Purchase or blend in house-
- Light-Medium-Heavy rates-
- Sterilize or not; frequency-
- Add organics or not-
- and on AD INFINITUM!

This one operation is probably the most effective tool, excepting the verticut and greens mower that will give the Superintendent and his members the most desired results for time and expense on the golf course. Golf courses with small budgets can see better results in many instances, from a well-done job of topdressing than from a fertilizer application.

In fact, in the early years, when budgets were low and the soil mixing was done in-house as a part of keeping the crew busy on rainy and/or cold days, topdressing was, on many Southern courses, the only plant food source ever applied on Bermuda.

Animal manures were plentiful and near-by and often had, just for hauling away. Native top-soil just had to be scraped up from the property next door and hauled to the mixing shed. Nearly every club had a lumber yard owner as a member and when plastering was the popular wall finish, you could get his contaminated or discolored white plaster sand, just for cleaning it up and hauling it to the course.

Grass clippings and the fall leaves were mixed with the top-soil and manures, then allowed to compost. The mix was blended with the sands to the desired results of the superintendent. Generally, it was screened through $\frac{1}{2}$ " and again through a $\frac{1}{4}$ " mesh screen after being stored inside and allowed to dry; or at least under cover of either canvas or straw if a building with a roof and at least three sides was not available; as was more likely the case.

This topdressing was then applied, usually every 4 to 6 weeks by hand, for both fertilizing as well as smoothing and leveling the surface. As a youngster, and for many years as a superintendent, this was the only time that our Bermuda greens ever received any type of plant food. We

used a starter fertilizer of say, an 0-12-12 or 0-20-20 prior to sowing rye, a little Nitrate of Soda, Ferrous Sulfate, or Nitrate of Soda Potash dissolved in water to feed the rye early in the A.M. in the spring to burn out the rye. That was it as far as plant food goes, except the monthly topdressings from April through September or October depending on how far South you were.

Golf greens, even thought not planted to the fine hybrid bermudas we have today, at clubs with conscientious superintendents, offered putting surfaces equal to and in many cases, better than those of today as far as lack of grain, quickness, and trueness of roll. This was primarily due to lack of water, little or practically no chemical nitrogen and FREQUENT TOPDRESSING, WELL WORKED into the surface.

One of the most difficult things I had to cope with when I came to Florida, was the membership complaining about topdressing. While in Savannah, the Carolinas, and Atlanta, the golfers really looked forward to topdressing and you just could not DO IT ENOUGH to suit them. The high rollers would load the course for about 2 to 3 weeks right after topping then wane off until the word was out; "the man just topdressed this week," and back they would come. In Jacksonville, it was just the opposite, not only at my club, but at the other clubs except Ponte Vedra; that club had a number of golfers from Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas, since there were not any seashore links except for Sea Island and Ponte Vedra. Put out topdressing in Jacksonville, and there would hardly be a golfer out for 2 to 3 weeks until that, "damned dirt would be worked down." To some extent, that feeling still persists today throughout Florida.

Primarily due to the fact that many of us look upon topdressing as a deadly duty and therefore, to cut down on complaints; do it quite INFREQUENTLY and QUITE HEAVILY. The coming of the aerifier and verticut brought the advent of, "there is now no need to topdress," from basically the non-golfing academia. Their stand was, the verticut could control grain and thatch, the aerifier controlled thatch and brought up soil, so therefore, there was little or no need of topdressing, plus the fact that Nitrogen fertilizers were quite plentiful and cheap compared to an in-house mix and storage of topping materials.

(Continued on Page 22)



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(Continued from Page 14)

I remember years ago when this controversy was at its height, Drs. O.J. Noer, Al Radko, and Fred Grau, all used to show slides of some of the old timers who had never gotten away from a frequent and light topdressing program and always used the slides as an example of a fine appearing as well as a true putting surface on minimum N² feedings. The main secret was the same materials were always used frequently and there were never any layers in the soil profile.

Dr. Noer had slides of E.B. Steiniger's Pine Valley in New Jersey, showing the most beautiful soil profile you could every want. "Doc" used to say, "the USGA would never approve of this mix," but Eb's grass has liked it for 50 years, and the grass doesn't know the USGA, but it sure as hell knows the loving care Eb and his staff put in the aging, mixing, and applying the mix and has responded to this care all these years and after all, "the grass tells the story." Never could truer and more prophetic words have been spoken. The last time I saw the slide, the profile was over 2 feet thick with roots all through the profile.

Proof of topdressing's many benefits has now and again come to the fore-front. The stimpmeter has proven the results of the mechanics of properly applied dressing, and many fine courses have gone back to the old means how be it with modern ways. Had the equipment been available in past years that we have today, we would have probably topped the greens EVERY MONDAY or EVERY OTHER MONDAY at the LEAST.

So the basics of good dressing has not changed that much over the years:

- A. Use materials closest to that of your existing soils you can purchase or create.
- B. NEVER CHANGE THE MIX.
- C. Do it lightly.
- D. Do it frequently.
- E. Do it well so that the end results, even that day, are apparent to both the eye and the roll of the ball.
- F. NEVER CHANGE THE MIX.

The stimulation of bacterial action from dressing using the above formula can not only give you a good putting surface, by reducing thatch, but possibly reduce the amounts of N² now advocated. Reduction in N² will eventually prove most beneficial in many ways; reduced grain and thatch, reduced water, deeper roots, less disease, and fewer insect problems. Since our modern theory in golf maintenance is "back to basics," and golf as it should be played on a golf course and not an exceptionally fine manicured expanse of wall to wall grass, we should all reconsider this BASIC idea of frequent and light topdressing. The end results of its use and effectiveness in giving our golfers the best of putting surfaces, will justify any expenses involved. Topdressing is back, and personally I feel this time, to remain one of our primary tools in fine putting surface production. ■