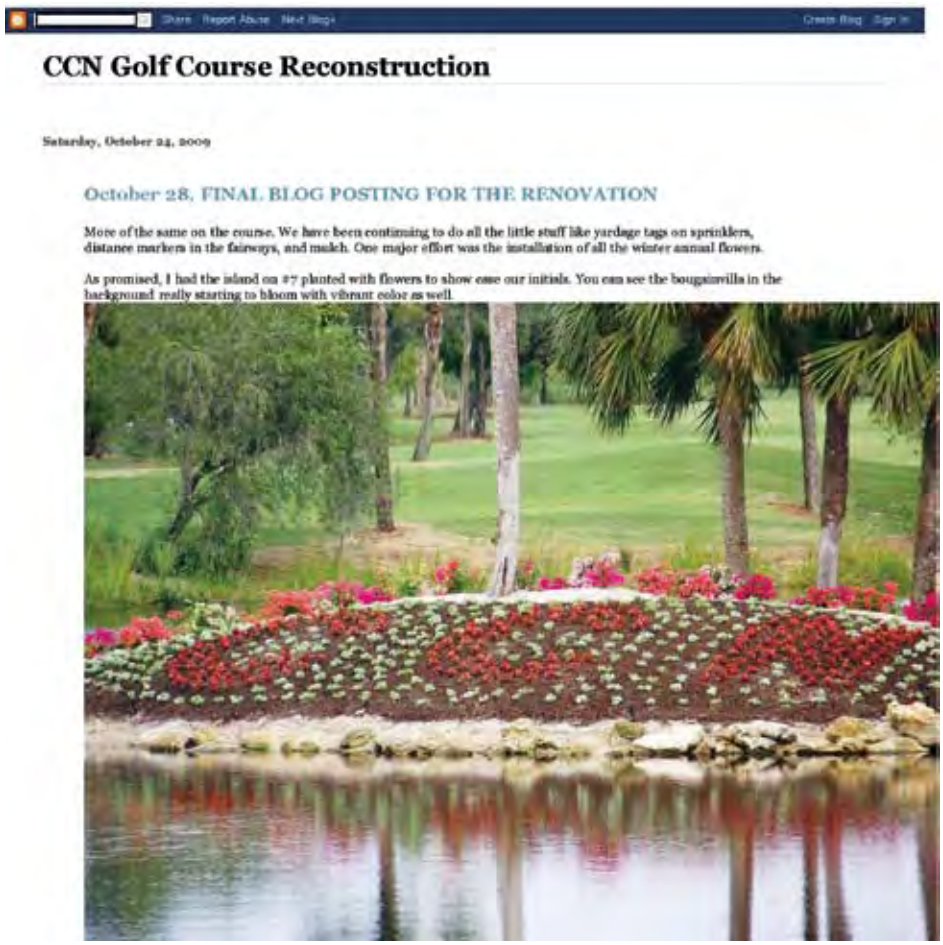
Effective Communications During Tough Times

We all know the challenges facing the our economy these days, and we have all seen how it has affected the revenues and maintenance budgets at our golf courses. Every case is unique and no one solution will fit all situations. But there is one common denominator that can be applied to all courses, and that is developing effective communication methods for getting your message across to management and members or customers.

Each golf course may have a wide variety of leadership and communication skills in various key positions from vocal members, board and committee members to department heads, general manager and the superintendent. Being able to identify and utilize the most effective communication tools at your location will be fundamental in your success and the club's during these trying times.


CCN Golf Course Reconstruction

Saturday, October 24, 2009

October 28, FINAL BLOG POSTING FOR THE RENOVATION

More of the same on the course. We have been continuing to do all the little stuff like yardage tags on sprinklers, distance markers in the fairways, and mulch. One major effort was the installation of all the winter annual flowers.

As promised, I had the island on #7 planted with flowers to show case our initials. You can see the bougainvilla in the background really starting to bloom with vibrant color as well.

Blog entry by Bill Davidson during CC of Naples renovation last summer. Photo by Bill Davidson.

If there is an information vacuum about the vision and strategy of the club overall – and especially in course conditioning, which is usually of paramount concern by the members and customers of a facility – that void will be filled with speculation, rumor and doubt unless you fill that void with facts and information.

There is little doubt that superintendents everywhere are stretching fewer budget dollars to maintain golf courses across the state. The net result is that course conditioning priorities must be jointly agreed upon by members, management and maintenance. It is not reasonable for anyone to expect the same level of manicured appearance when labor and materials budgets are reduced as they have been consistently over the past few years.

However, clear effective communication from the superintendent and club management can provide information and facts that can educate and lead to understanding by members who previously did not give golf-course maintenance requirements a second thought. Here are some comments from your peers about ways they are effectively communicating to their clubs:

Spreading the Word

Roy MacDonald, at the Hobe Sound Golf Club in Martin County, sets the stage for what most courses have had to deal with the past few years. He writes, "We had poor growing conditions like everyone else this past winter. In fact it was the coldest winter I have experienced since moving to Florida in 1981. Coupled with the fourth consecutive

year of reduced revenues and maintenance budgets and the funds running out of our emergency Hurricane account created a perfect storm for course-conditioning challenges.

"For example, we had discontinued our pre-emergent weed control applications in response to budget cuts and attempted to get by with post-emergent applications when and where needed. The long, wet cold winter weather thinned out our bermuda turf and weeds managed to fill in the gaps. We had to do something to demonstrate how we couldn't continue this way without expecting disappointing conditions.

"I created a spreadsheet depicting the expenditures for labor, chemicals, fertilizers and services that covered the last 10 years. The board was able to see the direct relationship between the gradual decline in certain aspects of the course conditioning relative to the reduced spending for the resources needed to maintain a desired level of maintenance. As a result of that presentation, a positive budget adjustment for chemicals and fertilizers was approved."

Computing the Value of Communicating

Meanwhile over in Naples, Bill Davidson at the County Club of Naples, is capitalizing on the advent of online blogging to keep his members informed about course projects and conditions especially during the summer when so many of them are away. I logged on to Bill's two blogs and could immediately see the educational value as he explained maintenance procedures and was able to insert photos and videos to illustrate his points.

Davidson explained, "Last year during our course reconstruction project, I blogged almost weekly and it became almost a cult following among the members as they could track the progress of the changes to the course via the photos and comments. Previously I had chronicled our summer aerification and verticutting programs to show the members the build up and removal of the thatch material and why it was important."

Davidson also does a monthly full-page newsletter article except in the summers when he blogs. Yet he says that despite all the success he's had online and in newsletters, the best way he communicates is face to face.

"I make it a point to go into the golf shop at least three to four times a day. I like to see when our avid golfers and active members are playing and make it point to swing by the practice tee, putting green or golf shop so I can be sure to share with them on a one-on-one basis. My club appreciates the face time.

"It also helps that my green chairmen is a bit of a 'techie' also. We are able to communicate via text message to stay on top of things easily and rapidly."

To see how Davidson used online blogging to keep his members informed, you can visit his blog sites at *http://ccnsummer2010.blogspot.com* and *http://ccnrebuild.blogspot.com*

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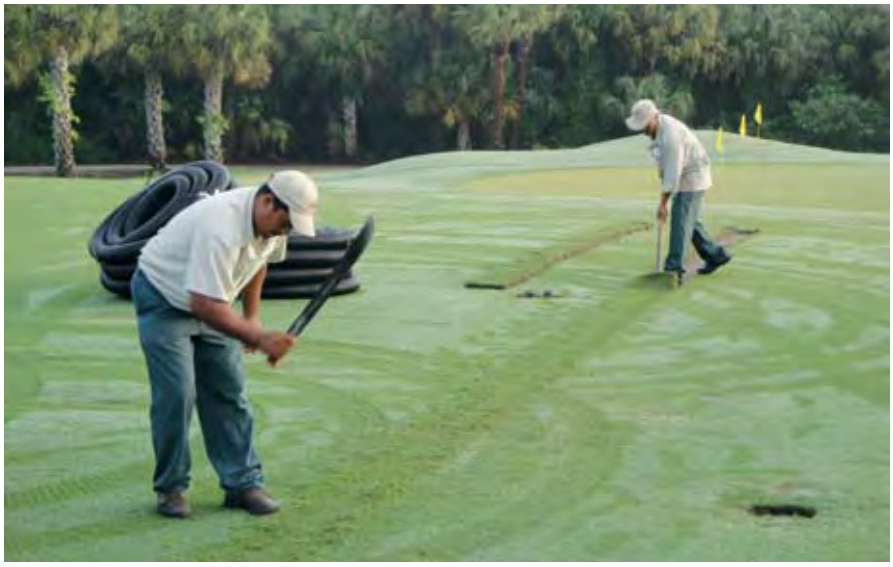
SUPER TIP

Drainage, Drainage, Drainage

By Darren J. Davis



Use a 12-inch wide sod cutter blade to make the intial cut on the painted drain lines. Photo by Darren Davis.

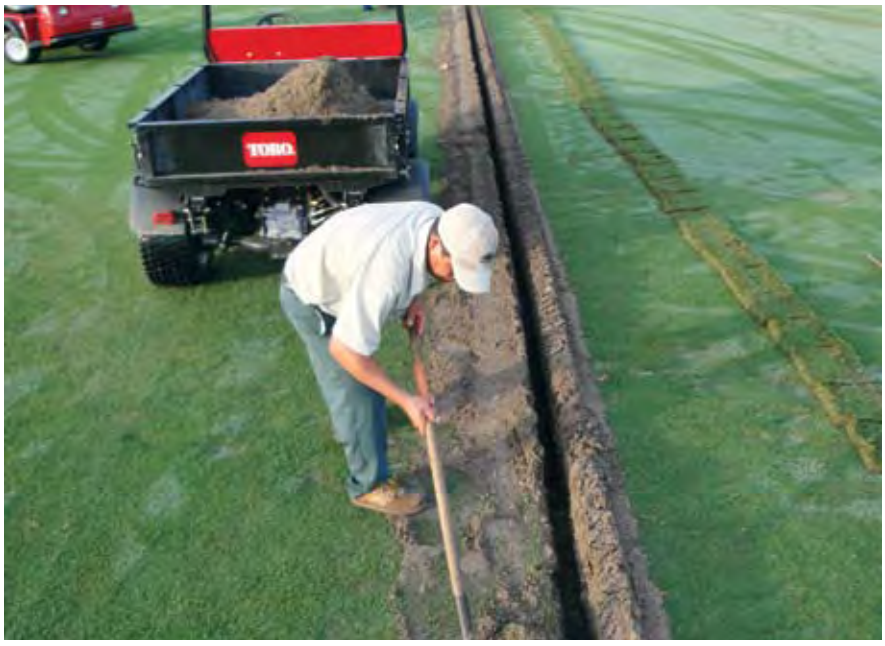
On a recent ride around my golf course, I had my ever-present paint gun locked and loaded and within easy reach. That day as I negotiated the 16th hole with my assistant Andy riding shotgun, a wet area caught my attention out of the side of my eye. With my right hand still grasping the steering wheel and my eyes trained forward, I reached for the floor, grasped the handle of my paint gun with my left hand, and within seconds my index finger hit the trigger —painting another drainage project. Not that I am proud of it, but I am fairly skilled at having a paint gun in my hand and in use in seconds, all without impeding my forward progress. As I hit my mark, my assistant remarked, "You know Darren, I am worried about you."

I stopped the cart and asked, "What do you mean? What's up?"

He looked me in the eye and said, "I think you may need to attend … meetings."

With a quizzical look on my face I said, "Huh?! What meetings?"

He said, "You know … drain-aholic meetings" Without missing a beat he added with a smile on his face, "Hi, my name is Darren Davis, and I am a drain-aholic." Not necessarily known for his humor, I had to laugh out loud and compliment his wit.



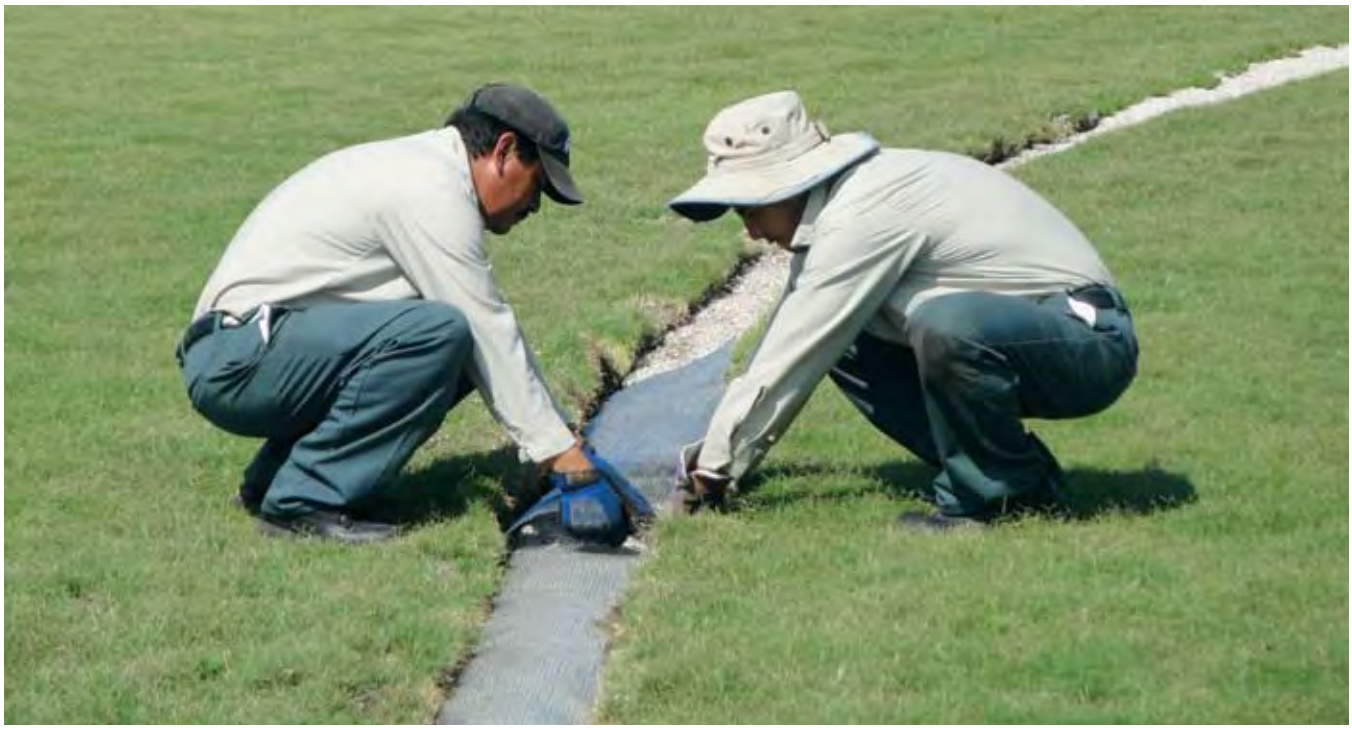
Excavate the drain line to a depth of 16 inches and 12 inches wide. Photo by Darren Davis.

Truth be told, Andy is not far off on his assessment. As I wondered whether I was indeed addicted, and thought about the more than 14 miles of subsurface drain tile that I have installed on my 18-hole golf course, it dawned on me. I realized that the blame, or more appropriately, the credit belongs to one of my mentors, Dr. Joe Duich, professor emeritus of turfgrass science at The Pennsylvania State University.

Dr. Duich developed the two-year turfgrass management technical program in 1957. He was known for his wit and challenging teaching method, and he was also one of my professors in 1990 and 1991. I can vividly recall many examples—one of which involved drainage.

During a class in the fall of 1991, after my classmates and I couldn't provide Dr. Duich with a suitable answer to his question, "What is one of the most fundamental aspects of successful turfgrass management," Dr. Duich informed us that the correct response was, "Drainage, drainage, drainage."

My classmates and I, who could rarely provide the famed turfgrass scientist



Install a strip of stucco mesh lath over the gravel layer. Photo by Darren Davis.

with an acceptable answer to one of his oral pop quizzes, sat quietly, somewhat confused and definitely speechless. After what seemed liked minutes, but in hindsight was probably seconds, Dr. Duich continued, "It's not rocket science. If you want to be successful at growing turfgrass, you need air drainage, surface drainage and subsurface drainage."

As was often the case with Dr. Duich, it took me a while to really get to the take-home message of this "Super Tip," which is subsurface drainage and our use of stucco mesh lath as part of the process. In case you are curious, the aforementioned 14 miles of subsurface drainage installed during my 18-year tenure at Olde Florida Golf Club is not an exaggeration.

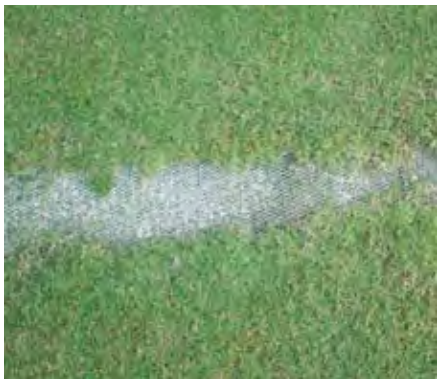
Our method of installing drainage is not unique; however, based on the comments I have received from others, what is unique is our use of stucco mesh lath as a cover. The steps in our drainage installation and use of stucco mesh lath are as follows:

Step one of our drainage installation is to figure out the best method to get water from "point A to point B". After my trusty paint gun and I paint out a drainage project, which is, of course, the easy part, my assistants consult our irrigation as-built, a wire tracer, etc., to determine if there are any subsurface items that the staff will need to avoid.

Next, a sod cutter with a 12-inch blade is used to remove the turfgrass (Note: the use of the narrow sod cutter blade will become evident at the end).

The soil is then excavated to a depth of 16 inches and a width of 12 inches.

Flexible, perforated drainage pipe is laid in the bottom center of the trench and pea gravel is carefully installed and compacted so the gravel is level with existing grade.



The mesh will hold the gravel in place and help turf coverage. Photo by Darren Davis.

Now—DRUMROLL—for the "Super Tip" part of this drainage procedure… We purchase sheets of stucco mesh lath (without paper backing) from our local Lowes that measures 27 by 96 inches. After marking the center of the sheets' width with a tape measure and a Sharpie, an employee cuts the sheet with a pair of tin snips to produce two 13½-inch sheets. In the field, the sod on both sides of the new drain line is lifted with a shovel, and the mesh lath is tucked under the turf on both sides of the trench.

And that's why we used the 12 inch sod cutter blade width.

Using stucco mesh lath as a cover provides several benefits. First, the drainage will be more effective in quickly removing water from the surface if the water does not have to penetrate a layer of thatch and/or soil. Second, the mesh lath holds the gravel beneath the surface so machinery does not dislodge the gravel and damage the reels on our mowing equipment. Finally, the mesh lath also provides a fixed surface for bermudagrass stolons to attach as they grow laterally across the trench. It really isn't rocket science, but the stucco mesh lath has worked well for us.