

# Lewis' 'Warm Water Solution'

With reputations on the line, Portland CC's crew turned jeers into cheers

BY WILL BARTLETT

Pat Lewis, head greenkeeper at Portland Country Club in Falmouth, Maine, might have been in hot water this spring if it weren't for warm water.

Lewis had trouble with some greens that were seeded and not growing well; that led to an unhappy Lewis, disgruntled club members, and a solution golf course superintendents everywhere may be happy to hear about.

Due to a light-snow winter in the area, the greens were left more exposed to the cold than usual. "Without snow cover there was an ice buildup on the greens," Lewis said. "Ice damage caused the grass to come in extremely thin. Our bentgrass survived well, but the majority of the greens that died were poa annua (Latin for 'annual bluegrass') and some were too well shaded to grow back in Maine in April."

Five shaded greens on the back nine had lost all of their poa annua. Poa is essentially a grass that greenkeepers don't strive to produce, but it is native to the Northeast and is a prolific seed producer.

"Since it grows naturally it would be extremely difficult to eradicate," said Lewis. "The newer, bentgrass courses in the area did not have a problem this spring at all."

"We try all summer to get bentgrass, but on the older courses — such as the Portland Country Club, which is more than 70 years old — poa will probably always be around."

When the poa died, grass on the greens became so thin that they were almost unplayable. A membership revolt was imminent if something were not done in a hurry.

For Lewis, who's 27 and a graduate of the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at the University of Massachusetts, it was essentially an informal evaluation time. Having only two years on the job, he needed to prove to the members that he could handle difficult situations on a course that demands excellence.

Other course superintendents in the Northeast reportedly had lost their jobs partly due to the disastrous effects of winter kill this year.

It was under that kind of



Portland Country Club Superintendent Pat Lewis kneels with his sidekick Kirby, flanked by, from front, Mike Poole, Jim Hodge, J.B. Christie and Peter Marshall on the 14th green which they saved from a disastrous winter kill.



Pat Lewis and his crew swallowed hard last spring when they saw the devastation of winter kill on their course, including these fairways for the 11th and 12th holes.

pressure that Lewis and his assistant, Peter Marshall, a former nursery manager in a landscaping operation, came up with a brainstorm. They were standing near the barren and shaded 10th green in mid-April when Lewis mentioned that the ground temperature on the mostly shaded green was 48 degrees, which is too cold for good germination.

"The water temperature in the irrigation system was 38 degrees, so watering the greens would have just made the ground colder," making germination of the bentgrass seed difficult if not impossible, Lewis lamented.

And so it was at greenside that Lewis and Marshall looked at each other and simultaneously said, "Warm water."

They agreed that if warm water

were used on the seeded areas it might stimulate growth and hasten the recovery of the sparse greens.

"We planted bentgrass seed on those shaded greens in mid-April, when soil temperatures were still 48 degrees. After seeding we covered the greens with turf covers," Lewis said. At that point the members were playing on five temporary greens, and they were not happy about it.

In an effort to apply their idea, Lewis, Marshall and company filled their 200-gallon sprayer with hot water mixed with cold, making a tank temperature of 70 degrees. Two or three times a day they would pull up the turf covers and water the greens with the 70-degree water and cover them again.

"We had germination in nine days," said Marshall. And that is

## On the Green

### Tell us your own story

This is the first installment of a column Golf Course News will publish from superintendents for superintendents: On the Links.

Just as we tell here of Portland (Maine) Country Club's Pat Lewis and his Holmesian "Warm Water Solution," so will we each month relate an interesting story from a superintendent somewhere.

If you have something to share — be it how you solved a particular problem, or devised some sort of innovation, or "a-funny-thing-happened-on-the-way-to-the-maintenance-building" tale — please write and share it with us. It's worth \$50 if we use it.

Just write: On the Links, Golf Course News, P.O. Box 997, Yarmouth, ME 04096.

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an amazingly short period for April germination in Maine.

"It took away from other chores that we normally do in the spring, but it was worth it in the long run. It was definitely labor-intensive, and the crew was even coming in on their days off to get the job done," said Marshall.

"We were devastated with winter kill and ice damage, and Pat's crew, under his direction, was outstanding. They worked unlimited hours," said PCC Greens Committee Chairman Mike Francoeur.

USGA Greens Section representative Jim Conley told Francoeur that their difficulties were typical for the entire East Coast this year.

"You can't control the winter elements and sometimes re-seeding early in the spring is a waste of money in Maine; but hard work and a lot of long hours did the job."

"We just sit back and let Pat and his crew go to work. We give them the resources and they go ahead and get the job done. Pat and his crew are top-notch," said Francoeur.

The end result was that greens that were dead in April were full and playable by the Memorial Day weekend — six weeks compared to the normal five months.

"We had excellent catch," said Lewis. "They did take a step backward once they were opened for traffic, what with the golfers walking on them, but today they look pretty good."

"Our greens are about 70 percent bentgrass now and 30 percent poa. Ideally, I'd like to have 100 percent bentgrass. I'd sleep a lot better," joked Lewis.

But most important to a young man like Lewis, in his line of work, is that he now has a solution to a recurrent problem.

"If I lose poa this winter, at least I know what I'll do in the spring," he said.

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