

## Ice Breakers

# Sweda, Witt handle mega-problems with dispatch

By MARK LESLIE

It seems an Ice Age ago since Columbia Hills Country Club in Columbia Station, Ohio, was open. Indeed, according to superintendent Don Sweda, anxious club members in March were toying with the idea of playing golf over and around the 14-inch-thick chunks of ice littering their course.

While Sweda struggled with ridding two-thirds of his grounds of the mega-load of ice — left from the backed-up floodwaters of neighboring waterways — hundreds of miles away, Randy Witt found a new way to tackle ice half that thick at his Oneida Golf and Riding Club in Green Bay, Wis. Witt ran an aerator over the greens to loosen up the ice a half-inch at a time, then brushed it off and started on the next half-inch.

The rule of thumb is that bentgrass will live 60 days under ice. That's when superintendents should spring into action.

Using an aerator to break up the ice wasn't possible at Columbia Hills.

"We used our front-end loader. We either loaded it onto trucks and hauled it away, or literally pushed it away into the roughs," said Sweda. "The ground being still frozen, we were able to do it without hurting much turf."

Twelve fairways, six greens and six tees were under ice at Columbia Hills, the worst-hit in that area.

Chain saws, normally used for felling and cutting up trees, became ice-cutters to saw the huge chunks into manageable sizes. And Sweda used every able body at his disposal, swelling his eight-man crew to more than 20 by using kitchen help and other club employees.

Sweda, who normally would have opened the course by the end of February, said he couldn't even see the ground in some areas, the ice was so thick.

"We're still evaluating the damage," he said.

Was he worried about upset golfers? "I worry about things I have control over," he said. "I can't stop a flood."

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Meanwhile, Witt was perfecting an alternative to the standard techniques of spraying activated charcoal and darkening agents like Milorganite. Using them, a superintendent has to assume he will get sunshine.

Reporting on Witt's method at the International Golf Course Conference and Show in Dallas in February, U.S. Golf Association agronomist Robert Vavrek Jr. said: "The most important key to success is to not get too greedy... Also, work early in the morning when the ice is more brittle. The aerifier breaks up the ice in bigger chunks then."

Vavrek related on this step-by-step procedure:

- Pass a GA30 aerifier across the putting green with 6 inches of ice cover. Use standard 1-inch-diameter

solid tines on thick ice. When you get close to the turf surface, switch to 5/8-inch-diameter solid tines. Use blunt-tipped tines for thicker ice, and pointier tines closer to the putting surface.

"If you try to set the depth of penetration more than a half-inch, you get broken tines, broken arms, foremasters and other parts," Vavrek said. "Remember, don't get too greedy. Spend a few more passes across the green and it works well.

Go 90 degrees in the opposite direction. After two or three passes, the ice breaks up easily."

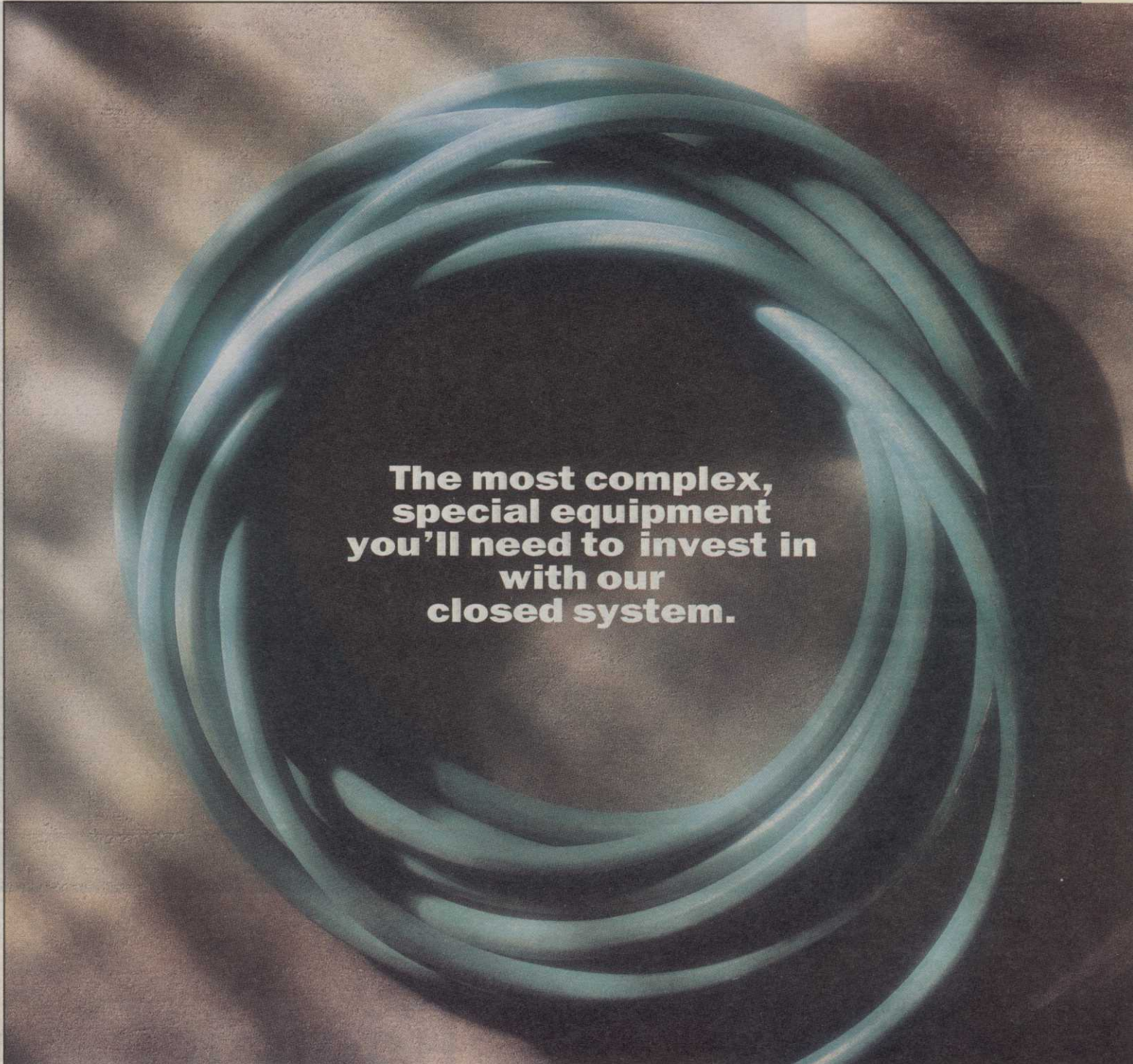
- Once ice accumulates, use a standard 72-inch mower equipped with a brush and sweep the ice off the green. If the ice does not break up into little chunks, use pusher bars instead of brushes.

Using this practice, Witt has managed in some cases to remove six to eight inches of ice from 19 greens within a week.



One of many huge chunks of ice at Columbia Hills Country Club sits ready to be hauled away.

Photo by Don Sweda



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