

Winter's fast transition to summer puts extra, unpreventable stress on turf

By PETER BLAIS

S CARBOROUGH, Maine — While the northern Appalachian Mountains and chilly Gulf of Maine waters relieve tourists from the summer heat, the combination isn't enough to overcome summer stress on the area's golf course turf, according to agronomist Dr. Annamarie Pennucci.

"The quick transition from winter to summer puts signifi-

cant stress on turf, which often results in *pythium* and brown patch problems," said Pennucci, a turfgrass consultant who spoke recently at the Maine Golf Course Superintendents Association monthly meeting here.

While the calendar notes Spring officially begins March 20, Northern New England often experiences frosts and snowstorms into late April and early May. And while the calendar pegs June 21 as the first day of

summer, the unofficial kickoff to the holiday season in these parts is Memorial Day.

In other words, the three-month spring enjoyed by most regions of the country is frequently reduced to roughly

three weeks in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and much of Massachusetts.

Just as the weather changes gears quickly, so does the tourist-dependent Northern New England economy. Summer means an influx of golfers and a near-overnight jump from as few as 100 rounds per day to more than 300 rounds daily at some facilities, Pennucci said. The wear and tear associated with such a dramatic increase in play can damage turf quickly, she explained.

"The grass needs time to grow back and become hardy," Pennucci said. "But it frequently doesn't happen because of the [economic] need to get the course open and get players on the course. That gives every species of disease the chance to go nuts."

Although many would consider it unorthodox, Pennucci believes reducing fertilizer applications would be a partial solution to the problem.

Northern New England superintendents frequently use heavy fertilizer applications in late fall and early spring to give plant growth a kick start come late April and early May, she said. Her recommendation is to reduce the amount of fertilizer and to apply it earlier in the fall, say the first week of October. She would also allow grass to grow a little longer in

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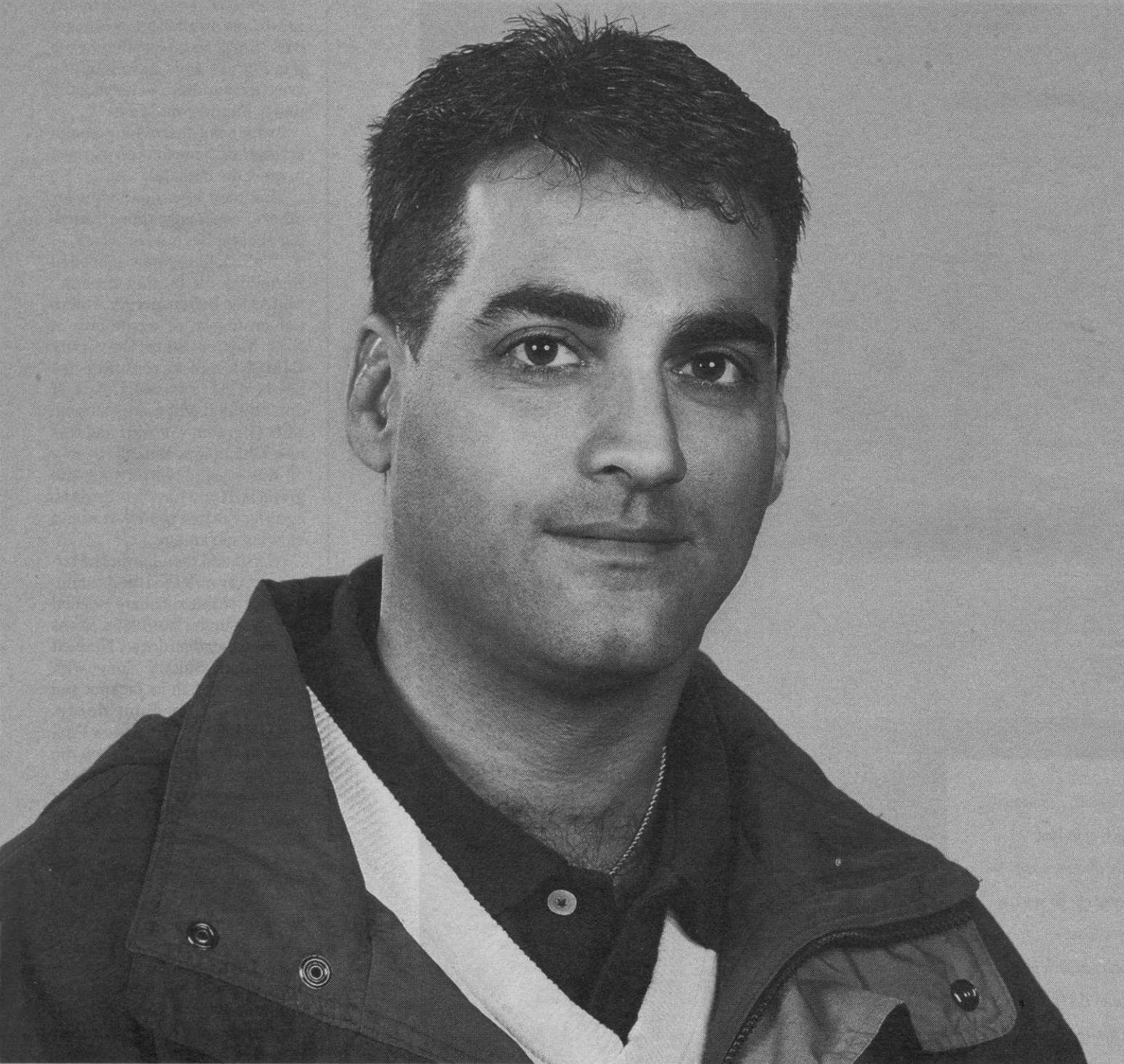
Dr. Annamarie Pennucci

the fall, entering dormancy in a healthier state and emerging from dormancy in a more gradual manner.

"It would slow down the rate of growth, making for a more even growing season and less susceptibility to disease," she said.

She realizes this would be a hard sell to golf pros and owners, who believe tight-cut greens and fairways are needed to attract business in the fall and green rather than brown grass to bring players out of hibernation in the spring.

But less fertilizer, higher cuts and a tad more patience would result in healthier grass and a lower maintenance budget through the heavy-play months of June, July and August, she assured.



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