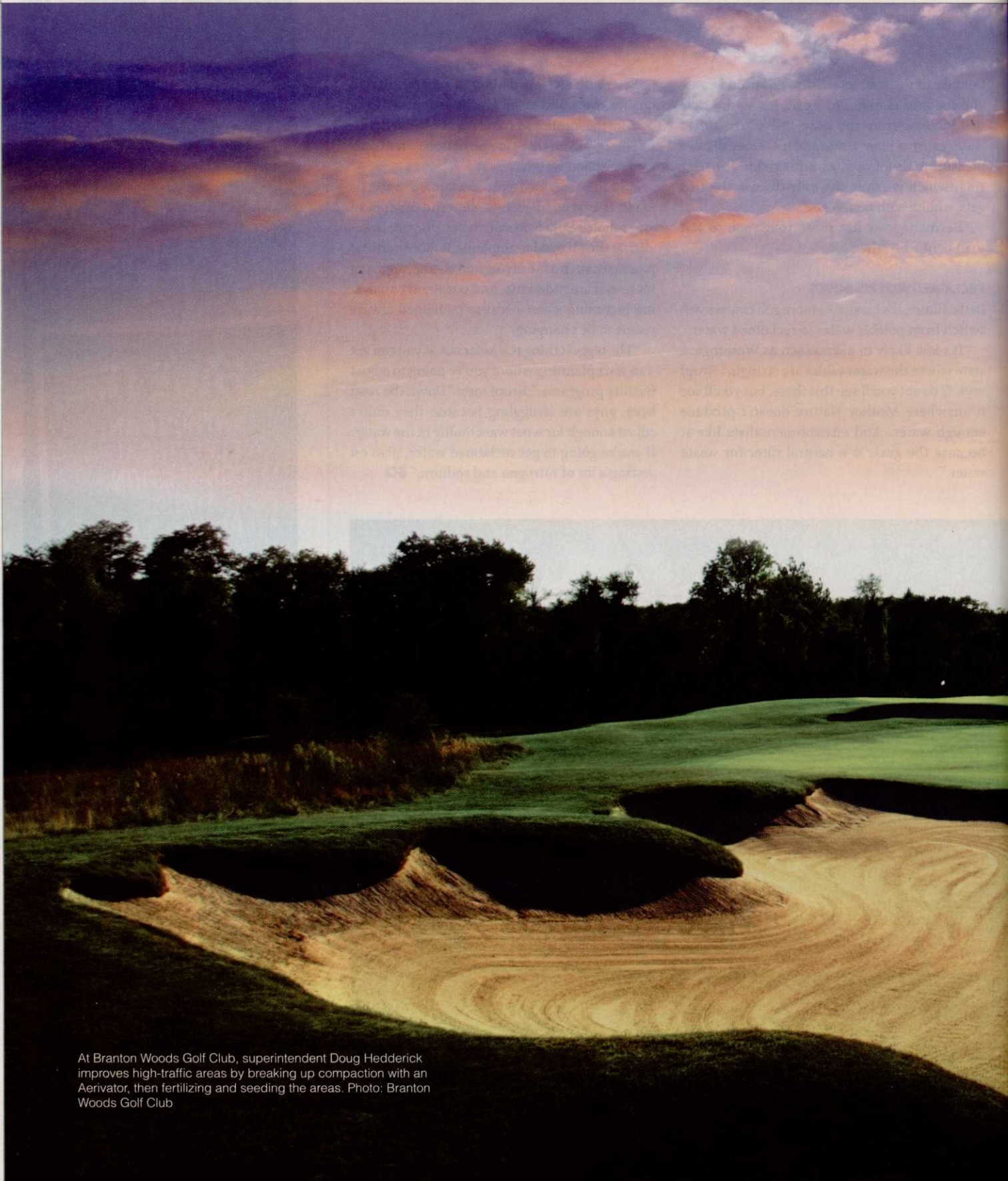
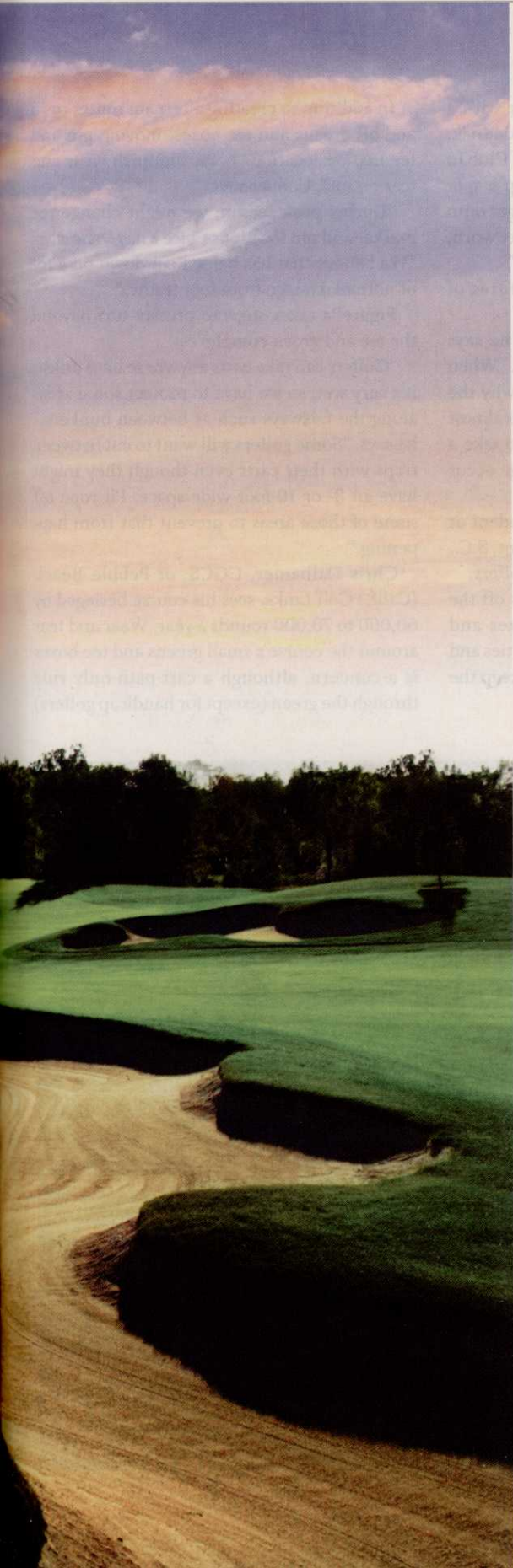


## TURFGRASS MAINTENANCE



At Branton Woods Golf Club, superintendent Doug Hedderick improves high-traffic areas by breaking up compaction with an Aerivator, then fertilizing and seeding the areas. Photo: Branton Woods Golf Club



BY JOHN TORSIELLO

# TURF WARS

Superintendents try to minimize wear and tear in high-traffic areas through cultural practices and altering golfers' behaviors

**S**ometimes Monica Cooper, CGCS, feels like she's fighting a losing battle. "I guess I'm a sucker for punishment," says the superintendent of Smyrna Municipal Golf Course in Bell Buckle, Tenn. "I try to keep golfers off the fairways when the grass is dormant during the transition time between winter and spring. They don't understand why they can't go off the cart paths. It's because that's a time when grass is most susceptible to damage from wear and tear.

"But I love what I do, and I keep trying to make the playing surface as good as I can for them," she adds. "We tell them what they need to do out on the course to help, but golfers at a municipal facility have about a five-minute memory span."

Kim Wood, golf course superintendent at the Tournament Players Club at The Canyons in Las Vegas, sympathizes with Cooper.

"I just don't think there's an awareness among most golfers about how much damage carts can do to turf," he says. "We've tried to initiate a 90-degree rule onto and off fairways, but nobody adheres to it. Human beings are like cattle. It's always the shortest possible route to where they're going. It's the same with the maintenance staff. You have to constantly remind them to watch where they access bunkers and not follow the same paths. It's quite a challenge."

Most golf course superintendents probably feel the same as Cooper and Wood as they struggle to prevent turf damage in high-traffic areas, such as entries and exits to and from tee boxes and greens, and on putting surfaces and tee areas themselves.

"You can't start accusing people of going where they shouldn't go and damaging turf," says Joe Figurella, golf course superintendent at The Links at Madison Green in Royal Palm Beach, Fla. "So we try and prevent damage in a number of ways."

**TRAFFIC CONTROL**

One of the most successful and least labor-intensive means of preventing damage in high-traffic areas is controlling the flow of golfers. This can be accomplished by cordoning areas leading to and from greens and tee boxes and directing golfers to their destinations on each hole with signage. It's wise to alter the exit routes daily to minimize wear to one particular area, superintendents say.

"We try to control the traffic flow by putting

posts into the ground joined together with a plastic, two-inch chain," says Doug Hedderick, superintendent at Branton Woods Golf Club in Hopewell Junction, N.Y. "We open up a spot along the cart path where people can get onto the fairway. When one area starts to get worn, we close it off and create another one."

Hedderick agrees golfers are creatures of habit.

"It's the path of least resistance," he says about golf course foot and cart patterns. "When one goes everyone will follow. That's why the ropes and directional signs work well. It's almost like herding sheep. It's much better to take a proactive stance rather than let damage occur and then try to fix it."

Rob Mackie, golf course superintendent at Dunes West Golf Club in Mount Pleasant, S.C., battles "lazy head syndrome" among golfers.

"Often, they like to park two inches off the cart path, especially around tee boxes and greens," he says. "So we placed railroad ties and roping in high-volume traffic areas to keep the carts on the paths."

In addition to creating alternate routes onto and off greens and tee boxes, moving pin and tee marker locations helps diminish wear and tear on turf, Cooper says.

"During peak season, we might change tee marker and pin locations twice a day," she says. "We believe that has helped cut down on a lot of normal damage from foot traffic."

Figurella takes steps to protect turf beyond the tee and green complexes.

"Golfers can take carts anywhere here unless it's very wet, so we have to protect some areas along the fairways such as between bunkers," he says. "Some golfers will want to cut between traps with their carts even though they might have an 8- or 10-foot wide space. I'll rope off some of those areas to prevent that from happening."

Chris Dalhamer, CGCS, of Pebble Beach (Calif.) Golf Links, sees his course besieged by 60,000 to 70,000 rounds a year. Wear and tear around the course's small greens and tee boxes is a concern, although a cart-path-only rule through the green (except for handicap golfers)

At The Links at Madison Green, superintendent Joe Figurella takes steps to protect turf in high-traffic areas beyond tee and green complexes, such as between bunkers. Photo: The Links at Madison Green





Each spring, superintendent Matt Strader and his staff reseed and resod high-traffic areas because of turf damage. Photo: Penn National Golf Club

alleviates much of the potential turf damage.

"We have some signage with ropes attached to stakes to alternate patterns onto and off of tee boxes and greens," he says. "Even though many golfers walk with caddies, because of the huge number of rounds we generate and the small size of our greens, we could have turf damage if we aren't careful."

#### PLAN OF ATTACK

Despite the best intentions of superintendents and their staffs, turf damage still occurs in high-traffic areas. But that damage can be lessened, and perhaps prevented in some instances, with an aggressive turf management plan for those areas most at risk.

"I don't think anyone wants to get into a curative mode with turf damage," Dalhamer says. "You don't want to be trying to revive damaged or worn turf year in and year out."

Dalhamer advises superintendents establish a turf management program for areas around and on greens and tees.

"You should monitor wear and tear and do as much as you can culturally to keep the turf healthy," he says. "We do a lot to stimulate the growth of grass through a fertility program, and we have an aggressive aerification program for our greens where we aerify six times a year."

That might present challenges for a superintendent whose paying customers expect pure putting surfaces when they visit.

"We use a slicer that creates an air pocket one to three inches below the surface and lets the green breathe," Dalhamer says. "All you can see at the top is a surgical-like incision. We'll do that an hour before we send the guys out to mow and roll in the morning. It's almost impossible to detect by golfers. We also verticut and topdress with sand to improve drainage."

#### WAYS TO IMPROVE TURF HEALTH IN HIGH-TRAFFIC AREAS

- Stimulate growth through a fertility program
- Aerify aggressively
- Verticut and topdress
- Move pin and tee locations
- Redirect golfer traffic with ropes and signs
- Hand-water when hot
- Resod or reseed

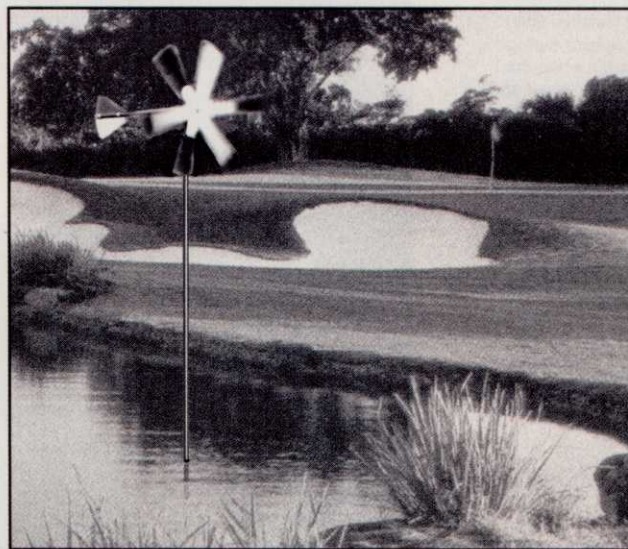
Matt Strader, golf course superintendent of the two courses at Penn National Golf Club in Fayetteville, Pa., sees a lot of wear and tear at the ends of cart paths, so each spring he and his staff will resod and reseed key areas.

"The big thing is keeping the fertility up in high-traffic areas so the grass can withstand the pressure better," he says.

Keeping turf in high-traffic areas as porous as possible can prevent serious damage.

"I've been using an Aerivator that shakes up the ground and breaks up any compaction in areas around greens and tee boxes," Hedderick says. "We'll put fertilizer and grass seed down in those areas, and the grass will come up in the hole that's made. The new blades of grass are protected until they're strong enough to withstand being walked on again."

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Island green complexes, which have a small slit of land where golfers walk on and off of the putting surface, can be a headache because there's only one or two points where people can walk.

"That's where you have to be especially aggressive aerifying to break up compaction of the soil caused by golfers walking on the turf," Wood says.

Figurella says he and his crew always work extra hard to relieve compaction in high-traffic areas. They'll fertilize and seed the area and then rope it off.

Mackie believes healthy turf is one of the biggest weapons a superintendent has in his or her battle against wear and tear on grass.

"Keeping your turf healthy and not allowing it to get lean helps prevent damage," he says. "We're always fertilizing and topdressing to prevent damage and to keep the turf strong."

### SEASONS GREETINGS

The severity of damage to turf around greens and tee boxes can be seasonal. During periods of heavy rain, it's vital to keep motorized carts off fairways and rough.

"Once it gets really hot in the summer, you see stress magnified," Wood says. "So wear and tear in high-traffic areas is going to be magnified."

Usually, some of the worst turf damage occurs during a drought when the grass is stressed and can't take a pounding, Strader says.

About three years ago, Mackie and his staff started allowing carts in fairways only during the winter so golfers would stay out of the rough where the grass is susceptible to damage.

"Golfers kind of look at you weirdly, but the plan has worked well and protected the rough areas," he says.

Spring is one of the most difficult times of the year for Cooper.

"We can go from dormancy to green and then back to dormancy in a few weeks in the spring," she says. "That's when it becomes difficult to make golfers aware of the damage they can do to dormant grass, especially after they've been allowed on the fairways a few days earlier."

Once it gets hot, one can see turf stress increase, especially in wear areas.

"We have a combination of ryegrass and bermudagrass, and there's a window of time

when the rye starts to go and the bermudagrass is starting to bloom that we'll see areas suffer thinning," Wood says. "Extreme heat just complicates the problem."

Hand-watering high-traffic areas during hot spells can help prevent turf stress.

### TIME TO REPAIR

Despite the best-laid plans, some turf damage simply can't be remedied.

"We've had a rare case of having to resod a par-3 tee box because it had gotten so beat up during the summer," Dalhamer says. "We're lucky because we have an endless supply of turf and the resources to resod an entire tee."

But most golf course superintendents aren't so fortunate.

"Most damage to fairways will go away eventually," Figurella says. "Mother Nature has a way of cleansing itself. But if it's serious enough damage, we'll have to go and repair the damage by hand." **GCI**

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Usually, some of the worst turf damage at Penn National Golf Club occurs during a drought when the grass is stressed and can't take a pounding, says superintendent Matt Strader. Photo: Penn National Golf Club

