

# Navigating political waters

No matter the structure of a club, diplomacy is the key for dealing with controversial decisions *By David McPherson*



The agronomic practices that seem to be the most beneficial to grasses and soils are the most contentious with members, says Donald Singlehurst, golf course superintendent at Royal Colwood Golf Club. Photo: Royal Colwood Golf Club

Good governance is the common denominator at the most successful clubs, says John Gravett, g.m. at the Granite Club. Photo: Granite Club



As keepers of the green and guardians of privileged playgrounds, golf course superintendents at private clubs have to navigate political waters daily. From potentially controversial turf maintenance practices such as aerification, tree removal and pesticide use to large course renovation projects, superintendents need a degree in diplomacy as much as a degree in agronomy.

Several superintendents at clubs throughout North America make it clear there are common ways keep this gamesmanship to a minimum: have an open mind and maintain good communication with membership, use consultants to validate your decisions and have a long-range, approved master plan.

"The impact politics plays at a golf club, especially a private club, can make or break a club in terms of maintenance and membership satisfaction," says Donald Singlehurst, golf course superintendent at Royal Colwood Golf Club in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. "As a superintendent at a semiprivate club, I'm aware there will always be some form of governance model made up of club members, and these members will have a direct impact on the direction the club will take.

"As Spock once said in 'Star Trek,' 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,'" Singlehurst adds. "This also holds true in a private club. I've always believed we defend par and set up the golf course for all to enjoy. Ironically, the agronomic practices that seem to be the most beneficial to the grasses and soils are the most contentious with members. The demand for ideal conditions all the time puts added stress on those who have to make the difficult decisions to schedule the work, and on those who actually do the work."

### THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

One key to ensuring politics play a minimal role in course maintenance is good governance. There need to be clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the superintendent, the general manager and the chairs of various member committees. Good governance is essential to ensure superintendents and members get along and are always working toward the same goal: making the golf course a better place to play. Just as in the corporate world, without good governance at a club, divisiveness, abuse of power and infighting arise.

While there's a different dynamic at every club when it comes to the relationship between the superintendent and the members, good governance is the common denominator at the most successful ones, says John Gravett, general manager at the high-end, private Granite Club in Stouffville, Ontario, Canada.

"My personal preference is the governance model in which the superintendent and the pro report to the general manager, who then reports to the board," Gravett says. "That's been the trend at successful clubs these days. This model protects the superintendent more from political influence because it's dealt with by the general manager at the board level.

"At clubs that don't have that structure, you might have the superintendent reporting to the green and property chair, the director of golf or the pro reporting to the club captain, and someone else reporting to the general manager," he adds. "That's when you get into the worst political games."

Whatever the structure, when it comes to working with committees, retired superintendent Gord Witteveen, who's a recipient of the GCSAA Distin-



Gravett

guished Service Award, advises superintendents can't win 'em all.

"Give in on things that don't matter much so you can have your way with the important stuff," Witteveen says. "With committee governance, you'll inevitably antagonize one or two members every year. That adds up and is the chief cause of superintendents being eased out before they're ready to retire."

At Des Moines Golf and Country Club in Iowa, Rick Tegtmeier, the director of grounds, says the committee structure at the 1,500-member, 36-hole private club is a key to its success. Instead of having a golf committee and a green committee, the club has a golf, green and grounds committee.

"This works well," Tegtmeier says. "Both groups want what's best for the golfer, and by



Tegtmeier

having the groups meet together, we work to meet that common goal. The director of golf and I help facilitate these meetings, along with our green chairman, who serves as the committee chair for one year and then moves up the ranks to president. This is a very good system because by the time he's our president, he has a good working knowledge of what we do in the golf course maintenance department.

"At our committee, I give all members the USGA Green Committee Guide," he adds. "I urge all members of the group to read it and try to abide by it. One of the things stressed in this book is how important it is to not have personal agendas. The committee is in place to do what's correct for the good of the entire membership."

Tegtmeier and his staff also attend board meetings to present brief reports each month and answer any questions that might arise about their department.

"It's important to have a leader who helps you and guides you, but also lets you do your own thing in your department," he says.

**STRONG LEADERSHIP**

One of the best ways to avoid political problems is to have strong leadership at the presidential level, says Paul Scenna, golf course superintendent at Beacon Hall Golf Club in Aurora, Ontario, Canada.

"A dictatorship in a private club works best because sometimes people are just dancing around the issues and are afraid to offend their friends," Scenna says.

While a dictatorship is seen by some as the ideal management model to avoid controversy when it comes to the superintendent's decision-making and recommendations, the larger the group one works with – in terms of the membership and the number of committees involved – directly relates to how much time

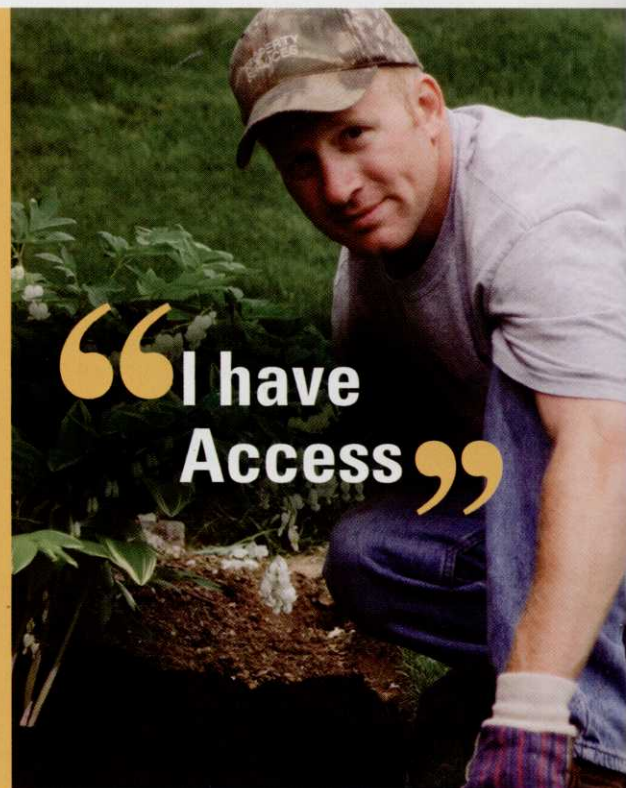
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Instead of having a golf committee and a green committee, the Des Moines Golf and Country Club has one committee for golf, green and grounds. Photo: Des Moines Golf and Country Club

the political process takes. David Kuypers, golf course superintendent at The Cutten Club in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, was lucky to spend a year at Winged Foot Golf Club in New York right before it was awarded the 2006 U.S. Open.

“They had a very small group of decision-makers – only four guys – whereas here at The Cutten Club, we have to go through a grounds and golf course committee for approval, then the finance committee, then the board of directors, then the membership as a whole,” Kuypers says. “It’s democracy in action.”

**PLAN AHEAD**

In addition to strong leadership, clubs need a master plan. This long-term vision sets the direction of the club and prioritizes maintenance and capital improvement issues, to prevent future disagreements.

Kuypers was hired by The Cutten Club in 2005, when ownership was about to make considerable renovations to the course. This also was the same time when club members took over ownership from the local university. One of the new management team’s first pieces of business was to draft a master plan.

“The strategic plan laid out everything from 2005 to 2010, and every year it’s updated,” Kuypers says. “That was the vision of the finance chair at the time. As a member-run facility, where each year three directors are removed and three new ones come in, you don’t want to be at the whim of who’s in charge that particular year. A five-year plan avoids that problem and gives continuity to the club’s vision.”

Gravett couldn’t agree with Kuypers more.

“You should sit down with the architect, green committee and board every two to three years and say, ‘Here’s the master plan for the golf course. It has everything on it,’” Gravett says. “So, if you have a plan to move a cart path or add a bunker, it’s on that plan. What that does is it sets the priorities without the influence of the green chair or board because the architect is involved and the committee is involved. Any deviation from that plan has to go back to the board and committee.”

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**OUTSIDE OPINIONS**

From a political standpoint, the master plan also protects superintendents by validating their maintenance decisions and providing a strategic focus. Another key is using consultants to validate superintendents' decisions.

"For example, the club at which I previously worked wanted to remove six trees that were more than 30 years old," Gravett says. "There was a fair amount of controversy, not only at the green committee level, but also with the membership, so we brought in a USGA consultant and someone who studies trees and sunlight angles and those types of things, and we got to the point where we didn't have to remove all the trees. Through selective pruning practices, we were able to remove certain branches so a certain amount of sun



Brewster



got into the green.

"It was a win-win because the superintendent wasn't seen as someone who just wanted to cut trees down," he adds. "Instead, we went out of our way to do our homework and brought

Political problems at private clubs can arise when superintendents believe they own the course. Photo: Granite Club

consultants in to help out with these recommendations."

**KEEP AN OPEN MIND**

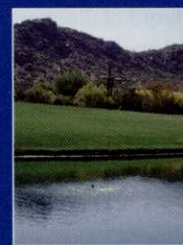
Political problems at private clubs also arise when superintendents believe they own the course, says Jim Nicol, CGCS, at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn., which has hosted several major championship events throughout the years.

"Superintendents who take ownership of golf courses by saying 'This is my course' are the ones who get in trouble, because it's not their course," says Nicol, who has been a superintendent since 1978.



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Bill Fach, golf course superintendent at Black Bear Ridge, in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, agrees with Nicol.

"I know we think it's ours after five to 10 years, but it's theirs," Fach says about club members. "They pay our wages."

In Fach's experience, avoiding conflicts and politics all comes down to having an open mind and looking for alternative solutions, which makes the superintendent and members happy. When it comes to agronomic and other turf issues, Fach recommends superintendents question themselves. For example, how can superintendents reconcile the need for aerification with members' desires?

"I could punch these holes in November when the course is shut down, even though I like to do it in July," Fach says.

Bob Brewster, golf course superintendent at Mississauga Golf & Country Club in Ontario, Canada, has been working at private clubs for more than 30 years. Brewster takes a similar approach. He has a designated time on Mondays when the course is closed for maintenance, allowing his team to topdress greens, and he doesn't use coring tines when aerating greens. Rather, he uses solid tines so there's no mess.

"We go in with 1/4-inch tines, aerate the greens, roll them and topdress them, and you wouldn't even know it'd been done three days later because you can't even see a hole," Brewster says.

"I've always tried to be golfer-friendly," he adds. "I've been using solid tines for 30 years. I'm a golfer, and I don't like my play interrupted. It's all about communication. You can never communicate enough. Golfers know more about course conditioning today than generations ago, so it's more difficult if you don't communicate properly."

Whether superintendents work in a democratic environment or under a dictatorship, diplomacy contributes to their success. **GCI**

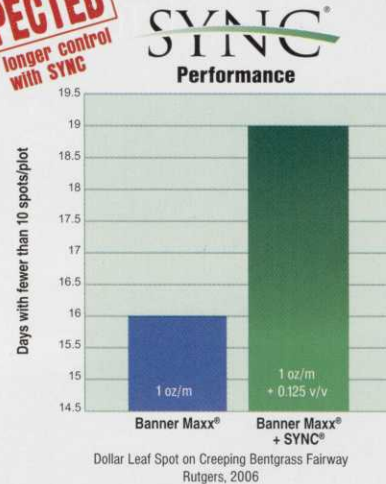
Bringing in a consultant to support a superintendent's decision can help limit controversy. Photo: Des Moines Golf and Country Club



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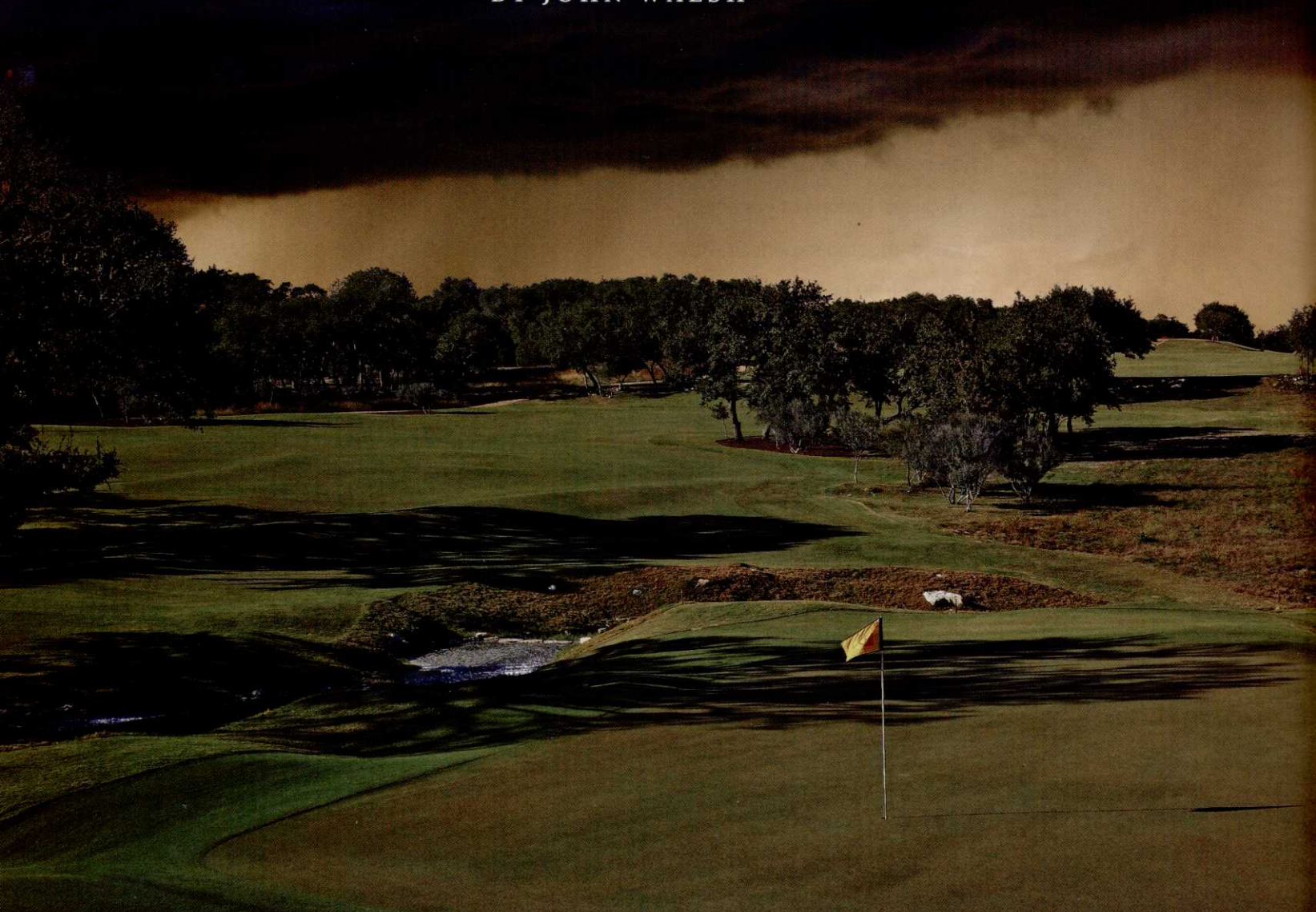


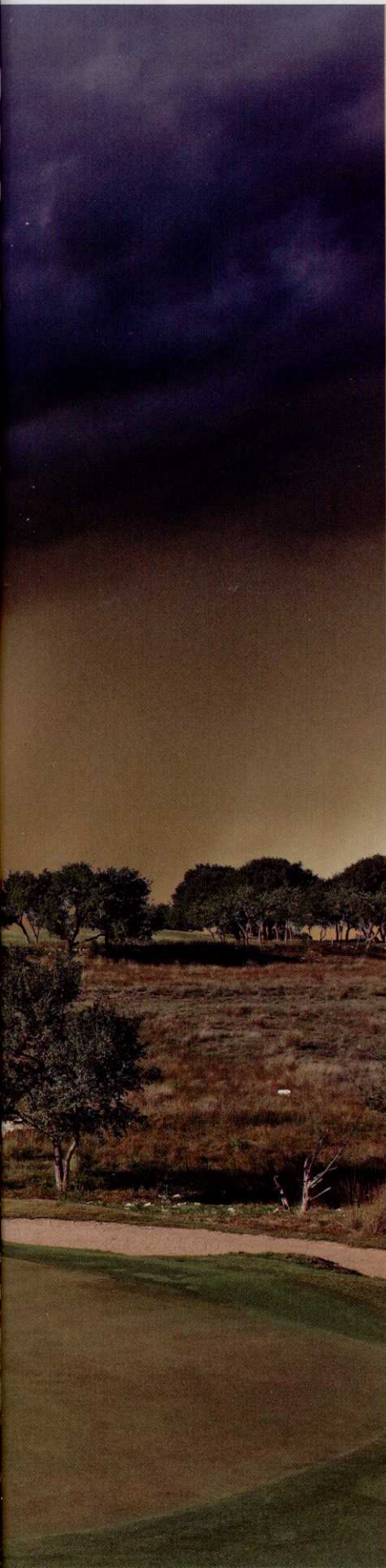
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# MONITORING MOTHER NATURE

Various tools help superintendents make the most  
of weather while tending turf

BY JOHN WALSH





As much as superintendents want control over the golf courses they maintain, turfgrass conditioning comes down to something out of their hands – weather. It contributes to lush, green turf and dead, brown turf. It also makes or breaks superintendents, forcing them to react constantly to the effects of weather.

Weather monitoring tools, then, are critical for superintendents. They impact the bottom line and product efficacy, prevent product wastefulness and help contribute to healthy turfgrass.

#### THE WEATHER REPORT

It's no secret northern Georgia has been in an extreme drought. This year, areas of the state are two inches below the norm, and in the past 16 months, 20 inches below the norm. Even though the private, 27-hole TPC Sugarloaf in Duluth has been in a level two drought since last summer and under a restricted water-use regulation, Mike Crawford, CGCS, has managed to keep the course healthy, growing and alive. The drought in the state has been so bad that, this past September, 61 counties skipped level three and went directly to level four, which bans all outdoor watering. But the golf industry has been targeted unfairly, Crawford says.

"Golf, which is a \$3.5-billion business in Georgia, has been mandated to save 97 percent of water when other businesses were asked to save only 10 percent," he says. "The GCSAA is working with the state to come up with a plan that works for all."

In Georgia, any water running into or off a property can be controlled by the state.

In Austin, Texas, Mark Semm, director of golf course maintenance at the private 18-hole Spanish Oaks, has been dealing with weather extremes the past few years. In 2004, during his first season at Spanish Oaks, the area experienced a high rain season of 50 inches. The next 18 months were under a drought stage close to water restrictions. And last year, rainfall totaled 60 inches.

"I'm in my third full season and have yet to see anything that's normal weatherwise," Semm says. "We've gone from extreme cool,

wet weather to heat and drought."

Kevin Shields, in his third year as golf course superintendent at Tuscany Reserve Golf Course in Naples, Fla., is no stranger to weather extremes either. Tuscany Reserve, which opened in 2005 and has a maintenance budget of \$1.9 million this year, experienced two wet years – 2003 and 2004 – during its grow-in, but the past few years have been dry. The course, which is covered with seashore paspalum, also has endured two tropical storms, and two hurricanes (in 2006), in which 50 percent of the plant material blew over and had to be replanted. There were wash outs and wind damage but no flooding.

The area has been in a phase three water restriction since November. It was in phase two a year ago in April and skipped phase one altogether.

In April, Shields kept an eye out for cold fronts to prevent frost damage on ornamentals. If frost is predicted, he doesn't run the irrigation system beforehand. Shields was looking for a stretch of good spring weather. This year, January was warmer than February, and compared to previous years, the Gulf temperature was almost the same as the soil temperature this spring. Typically, April and May are the driest times of the year, and June is the start of the rainy season, which falls in summer. This year the area is down 37 inches of rainfall, and Lake Okeechobee is four feet below normal.

"Right now, we're in a drought," he says. "It's a struggle to keep things looking good."

#### TOURNEY PREP

TPC Sugarloaf is the site of the AT&T Classic, the PGA Tour event it hosts in addition to the other 20 to 25 annual tournaments played there. Greg Norman designed the 13-year-old course.

Because of the magnitude of the AT&T Classic, weather monitoring is an essential aspect of tournament preparation. In addition to the typical weather monitoring tools Crawford has on the property, he has help from the PGA Tour's on-site meteorologist during the week of the tournament. The meteorologist has tools most don't, such as national weather radar and professional Web sites, to predict wind, temperature, severe weather and precipitation.

At Spanish Oaks in Austin, Texas, superintendent Mark Semm has been dealing with weather extremes, from high rain season to a drought stage.  
Photo: Spanish Oaks



“We use that information to help determine what we need to do,” says Crawford, who was the first employee hired at TPC Sugarloaf during its construction. “For example, if it’s dry and windy, we’ll water greens by hand. Or if it’s too windy, we might not roll greens because we don’t want the ball rolling off the green too easily. Every year, we use the meteorologist’s information. He can predict harsh weather with extreme accuracy, so we’re able to get people off the course before a situation becomes dangerous.”

Crawford, who has been at TPC Sugarloaf for 13 years and a superintendent for 16, says meteorologists almost can predict weather to the minute because of the radar they use. And because of the nature of the AT&T Classic, which has a \$5.5-million purse and millions of viewers

worldwide, weather prediction is critical.

#### MONITORING METHODS

In addition to the PGA Tour’s meteorologist, Crawford has his own weather monitoring routine. He uses a DTN/Meteorlogix weather radar to the best of his ability.

“It can pick up rainfall that doesn’t hit the ground, so it can be misleading,” he says.

The radar information comes through a satellite system or the Internet. The information is close to real-time but not quite, Crawford says. The radar can be insurance policy.

“If you use radar just one time to delay a fungicide application, then you’ve paid for it,” he says, adding that he wants to avoid applying a fungicide only to have it washed off the plant.

Like many superintendents, Crawford also uses a weather station, which is tied to the irrigation system, to help determine whether to irrigate or not. The weather station measures evapotranspiration, windfall and wind speed. Crawford also watches the Weather Channel.

“In my office, the Weather Channel is on TV all the time,” he says. “I watch it twice at night and listen to the radio for weather on the way to work.”

But unlike some superintendents, Crawford doesn’t have the ability to control his irrigation system remotely. That’s one of his goals this year.

Like Crawford, Semm has an on-site weather station in an area that’s a good representation of the entire golf course. The station tracks weather by the hour, day and month, and tracks temperature lows and highs, humidity, precipitation, solar radiation and wind. Semm compiles all the information and uses historical totals to determine when to start his semiannual verticutting and aerifying.

But Semm hasn’t been relying on weather data as much. Lately, extremes – dry and wet – have caused him to turn on a dime. He uses the Farmers’ Almanac, which he says has been pretty darn close in giving general trends of the year, as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Web site and the Weather Channel. He also watches local news stations daily.

Additionally, Semm uses the DTN/Meteorlogix forecasting tool, for which he pays an annual fee. He used to pick the information up through one of the company’s satellites, but he now uses the Web-based program. The tool has a parameter of 50 miles and can send warnings via cell phone, e-mail and text message. It tracks light rain, moderate rain and heavy rain, as well as lightning.

Semm’s weather station is integrated into the irrigation system so the system will shut down and won’t irrigate when it’s raining or will stop if it’s too windy. This can save between \$5,000 and \$15,000 a year, he says.

“For me, I sleep better at the end of the day when I put together something based on the information we have,” Semm says.



Weather station use at Spanish Oaks can save between \$5,000 and \$15,000 annually. Photo: Spanish Oaks



Even though Tuscany Reserve in Florida is experiencing drought conditions lately, the color of the seashore paspalum is hanging in there. Photo: Tuscany Reserve Golf Course

Shields' method is a bit different than Semm's. He uses a lot of history from previous years, tracking weather information on the Internet or by his hand-written notes from years past.

**PROBING FURTHER**

Aside from weather radar and stations, Crawford uses small soil probes to core greens throughout the day, looking for dryness to know when he needs to hand-water greens.

"Soil moisture consistency on greens is different," he says. "You never get it exact. Our typical irrigation cycle is seven minutes on all greens. Four or five greens get more air movement and sun, so they dry out quickly. We monitor them more closely to watch for wilt. We want to put out only the water needed to keep the plant healthy. Watering by hand is labor intensive, but the money we spend on that is worth its weight in gold."

Still, Crawford saves a lot on labor overall because of weather monitoring.

Shields would like to be using a soil probe, but he says it all comes down to money and budgets, and with the way the economy is, soil probes aren't an option right now.

**CULTURAL PRACTICES**

Semm, who has been at Spanish Oaks four years and a superintendent for seven, operates

the seven-year-old course with a \$1.9-million maintenance budget. The course is in hill country, built on rock and capped with a sandy loam profile eight to 12 inches deep. The USGA-spec greens feature TifEagle, and TifSport is everywhere else.

Ninety-five percent of Semm's cultural practices are conducted based on weather. There are a few things he would do agronomically in the rain, but topdressing is an exception. Always thinking about the weather, Semm tries to time wetting-agent applications during or within 48 hours of rainfall to get a wetting agent to wash in. Potassium and gypsum application for greens are timed with rain, too.

Shields's maintenance practices also are dictated by weather, and he also applies wetting agents right before it rains. He applies less fertilizer in the rough and in out-of-play areas because they're dormant.

On Jan. 15, a phase three water restriction took effect in some areas of Florida, allowing Shields to use only 180,000 gallons a night to water the golf course, common areas and surrounding home lawns. He submits a water report once a week detailing how much water he uses.

"I'm basically watering just the tees and greens," he says. "I haven't watered the rough in six months. The color of the paspalum is hanging in there, though." **GCI**



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