



Cut to the chase

Verticutting is just a screwdriver in a box of tools. But, is it also a viable method to dethatch?

by David McPherson

Sometimes it all goes back to the turf textbook. And, sometimes, superintendents rely too much on what they were taught, rather than experimenting with new methods. Today's topic is whether a regular verticutting of your greens and fairways can eliminate the need to do a separate cultural practice to get rid of the thatch below the surface? Let's let a couple turf professionals and one supplier weigh in on this subject and then you can decide.

Darren J. Davis, director of golf course operations at Olde Florida Golf Club doesn't believe the two can be interchanged. He uses both methods as cultural practices at his course in Naples, Fla. First, he does a light vertical mowing using a Toro

Triplex greens mower with veritcut blades on it.

“We do that as needed to control leafiness on the putting surface and to increase the trueness of the ball roll,” Davis says. “It is an excellent tool if done light and infrequently to increase the speed, trueness and smoothness of the greens. I would never consider that a dethatching method though by any means. We are just barely getting to the surface, if at all ... just pulling up the leaf blades, and, we often go in two directions.”

Davis goes back to his turf school days and the definition of dethatching to explain why he believes you can't use a verticutter to also

“Light verticutting for me is grooming, perhaps it is just verbiage, but grooming for me means **removing leaf tissue**, whereas verticutting means removing sloughed off leaves and old roots or thatch. I groom to increase speed and smoothness on my greens.”

— Matt Shaffer, Merion Golf Club



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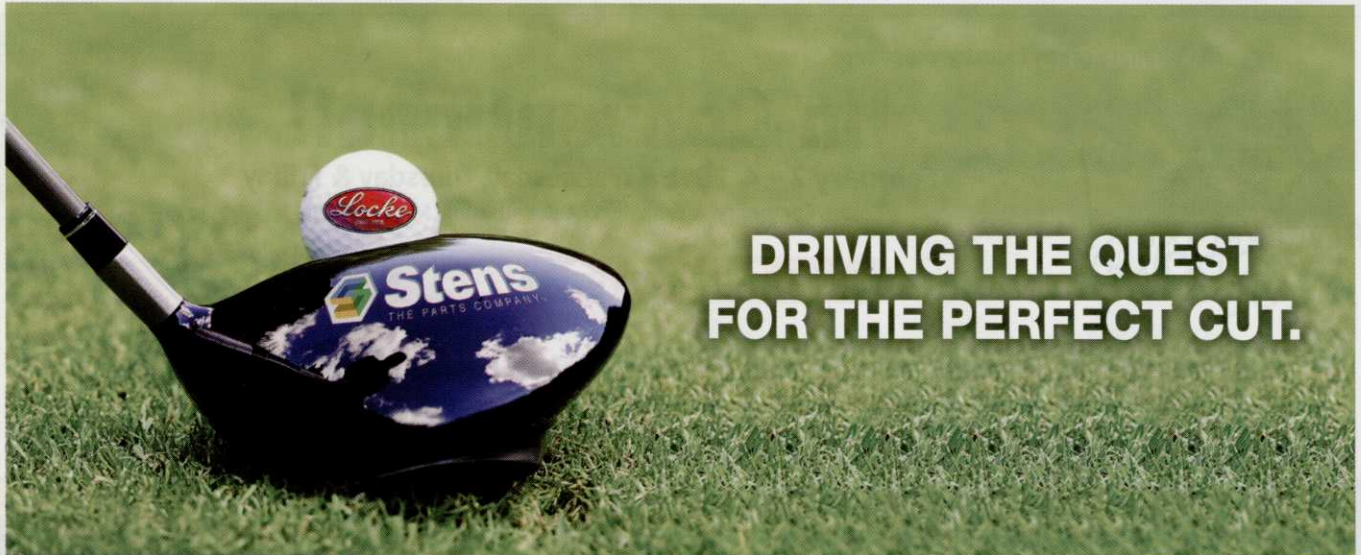
Darren J. Davis, director of golf course operations at Olde Florida Golf Club doesn't believe verticutting eliminates the need for thatching.



Davis and his crew uses both methods as cultural practices at his course in Naples, Fla.



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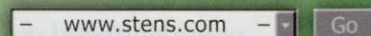
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“It’s like asking a superintendent, ‘do you believe that you should grind or do a touch-up grind.’ **I believe the answer comes from their schooling.** They come out of school with an answer and it just sits in their brain and no matter what anyone tells them, their way is the right way.”

— David Ramirez, Ariens Co.

dethatch. Instead, he prefers to use a Graden vertical mower, which he uses once a year on his greens.

“I hear some people talking about these vertical mowers you can use to detach, but I go back to turf school and the definition of thatch,” he says.

“To dethatch means getting into the thatch, which is below the surface, and blades on a vertical mower don’t do that,” Davis says. “Instead, I use a walk-behind Graden unit once a year on my greens. I use a 2-millimetre blade at 1-inch spacing and at a quarter-inch deep. This lets me cut all the way through that thatch. The Graden has a saw-like blade on

it and it cuts through the thatch and pulls it all up. The amount of thatch the Graden can pull up is tremendous. I recommend it as an excellent dethatching tool.”

Matt Shaffer, director of golf course operations, at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa., takes a bit of a different approach to verticutting. He can’t imagine using venting and light verticutting in the same sentence. Shaffer goes back to the textbook and to his learned definitions to explain what makes the most sense from a turf theory point of view.

“When I think of venting, it is an air shaft open or filled with sand,” he explains. “Light verticutting, for me, is grooming. Perhaps it

is just verbiage, but grooming for me means removing leaf tissue, whereas verticutting means removing sloughed off leaves and old roots or thatch. I groom to increase speed and smoothness on my greens.”

When your groomers are set at the effective depth you can’t see any lines, Shaffer adds. “I verticut to remove thatch, you will see the grooves whether you chose to leave them open or topdress them shut with sand,” he says. “I vent to bridge the gap between full-blow aeration. You won’t see these for long especially if you roll right afterwards. I aerate to remove earthy material and replace with sand to increase my percolation and to place amendments deep in the profile. If you can’t see the hole, then you haven’t aerated. In my opinion, all of these are independent actions that aren’t the same.”

According to some suppliers, if done frequently, verticutting can replace the need to dethatch

David Ramirez, Ariens Co. manager of product training, says a light, frequent verti-



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Frequency

Most golf course superintendents will verticut three times per year.

In the fall, if overseeding, then again in the spring, and finally, depending on the conditions, will verticut once again in the summer. While cultural practices for verticutting and dethatching, along with frequency, vary from greenkeeper to greenkeeper depending on their education and experience and the unique characteristics of their course, seasoned superintendent Brian Netz sums it up best with the following analogy.

"Personally, I don't think you can rely on one thing, like verticutting, to control your thatch," says the golf course superintendent at Presidio Golf Course in San Francisco, Calif. "You need to examine all parts of your plan. It's like a puzzle; you can't see the picture if your missing one piece. If you have verticutting, but don't have topdressing or fertility, you have no picture. On poa/bent greens I would say verticutting on a frequent basis would be adequate to control thatch. This would differ depending on climate and turf species, obviously. For us, it works well in combination with a dialed-in fertility plan and a frequent - weekly - light topdressing plan.

"You have to dial all the components in," he concludes. "That is a time-consuming process. I have yet to find where a solution to any agronomic problem is as simple as one solution. We do way too many things to our turf to consider just verticutting a solution to thatch. You have to examine how the thatch got there and what can we change to keep from creating it. Verticutting is just a screwdriver in a box full of tools."

cutting will provide enough venting to alleviate the need for superintendents and maintenance crews to dethatch. The key word, though, is frequent.

"If you wait too long, then the need for dethatching is necessary," Ramirez explains. "Superintendents should try to implement a frequent verticutting process as the clean-up time after dethatching is brutal."

Ramirez believes verticutting and dethatching are essentially the same thing. "It's like asking a superintendent, 'Do you believe that you should grind or do a touch-up grind?' I believe the answer comes from their schooling," he says. "They come out of school with



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an answer and it just sits in their brain and no matter what anyone tells them, their way is the right way.”

According to Ramirez’ way of thinking, the only difference between the two depends on the application and the equipment used. Ariens tow-behind verticutter is one of its best-selling products and Ramirez says golf course superintendents like it for three reasons.

“First, its aggressiveness,” he says. “It aggressively gets the thatch out. The blades are accepted by superintendents as one of the better blades on the market because of its carbine tip; they last longer, especially when you get to places like Colorado and even Hawaii where the soil is hard. The blade tip stays sharp even in these tough soil conditions.”

Ramirez says that a blade-type verticutter allows you to verticut and dethach – letting a superintendent get two jobs out of one.

“The second thing superintendents like about our blades is that you can set them to go down as deep as one inch,” Ramirez continues. “But, we don’t recommend this because it takes more to clean up.

“Instead, we recommend you set the blade to go down 1/8 to 1/4 of an inch and then you are actually alleviating the soil,” he adds. “You are not doing a true aeration, but you are relieving some of that compacted soil – getting into the roots faster or allowing the grass to germinate quicker if overseeding at the same time.”

Ramirez says his company’s verticutter doesn’t damage the turf and force superintendents to shut down their course for several days to clean up the thatch.

“I know some products sold have a spring tine for dethatching and those tines abuse the grass more than a blade,” he explains. “That spring is just sheer pressure on the ground and it will flick and tear; it doesn’t leave a consistent groove in the ground if you are trying to break that compaction. It will do a great job of getting the thatch to the top, but it’s not essentially doing the two things that a blade verticutter can do.” **GCI**

David McPherson is a freelance writer based in Toronto.

So where do you stand on the verticutting debate? Does this practice make sense for your course and how do you use it effectively? Weigh in on this topic by sending your thoughts to gci@gie.net. We will feature some of your responses in future issues.

United States Postal Service		(Requester Publications Only)	
Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation			
Required by 39 USC 3685			
1. Publication Title:	GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY		
2. Publication Number:	1054-0644		
3. Filing Date:	10-1-2010		
4. Issue of Frequency:	Monthly		
5. Number of Issues Published Annually:	12		
6. Annual Subscription Price:	Free to Qualified		
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not Printer):	GIE Media, Inc., 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway #201 Richfield, OH 44286	Contact Person:	Melody Berendt
		Telephone:	800-456-0707
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not Printer):	GIE Media, Inc. 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway #201 Richfield, OH 44286		
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor:	Publisher: Pat Jones, GIE Media, Inc., 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway, #201, Richfield, OH 44286; Editor: Mike Zawacki, GIE Media, Inc., 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway, #201, Richfield, OH 44286; Managing Editor: n/a, GIE Media, Inc., 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway, #201, Richfield, OH 44286		
10. Owner - Full name:	Richard J. W. Foster, Owner, 4020 Kinross Lakes Parkway #201, Richfield, OH 44286		
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities:	None		
13. Publication Title:	GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY		
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data:	September 2010		
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date	
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)	28,628	27,551	
b. Legitimate Paid and/or Requested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)			
(1) Individual Paid/Requested Mail Subscriptions Stated On PS Form 3541. (Include direct written request from recipient, telemarketing and internet requests from recipient, paid subscriptions including nominal rate subscriptions, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	27,067	26,683	
(2) Copies Requested by Employers for Distribution to Employees by Name or Position Stated on PS Form 3541	0	0	
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid or Requested Distribution Outside USPS	102	69	
(4) Requested Copies Distributed by Other Mail Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail)	0	0	
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Distribution (Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4))	27,168	26,752	
d. Nonrequested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)			
(1) Nonrequested Copies Stated on PS Form 3541 (include Sample copies, Requests Over 3 years old, Requests induced by a Premium, Bulk Sales and Requests including Association Requests, Names obtained from Business Directories, Lists, and other sources)	1,027	601	
(2) Nonrequested Copies Distributed Through the USPS by Other Classes of Mail (e.g. First-Class Mail, Nonrequester Copies mailed in excess of 10% Limit mail at Standard Mail or Package Services Rates)	0	0	
(3) Nonrequested Copies Distributed Outside the Mail (Include Pickup Stands, Trade Shows, Showrooms and Other Sources)	233	0	
e. Total Nonrequested Distribution (Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3))	1,260	601	
f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e)	28,428	27,353	
g. Copies not Distributed	199	198	
h. Total (Sum of 15f and g)	28,628	27,551	
i. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c divided by 15f times 100)	95.57%	97.80%	
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership for a Requester Publication is required and will be printed in the issue of this publication.		November 2010	
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner		Date	
Melody Berendt, Director Circulation		9/30/2010	
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