

Learning Experiences

BY LARRY AYLWARD
EDITOR

“W

ather” has been defined cleverly as “everyman’s chatter.” After experiencing the 2002 golf season, superintendents

from across the country will concur with the definition. Superintendents from Bend, Ore., to Orlando, Fla., are chattering about the wacky weather of 2002 and its impact on their golf courses — and probably will be talking about it for years to come.

“Without a doubt, it was one of the toughest seasons I’ve ever experienced,” says Don Abraham, certified superintendent of Steubenville (Ohio) CC.

“It was one of the most difficult years I’ve had in memory,” says Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill CC in Rochester, N.Y., who’s been tending turf for more than 30 years. “I felt like I was hanging on by my fingernails.”

“I’ve been here for 10 years, and this was my most challenging year,” says Chris Ayers, certified superintendent of Lakewood CC in Rockville, Md. “The drought and extreme heat took its toll on the golf course.”

The drought and heat of 2002 will go down in history. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, it was the warmest summer in the continental United States in about 70 years. The average temperature was 73.9 degrees F — the third hottest on record. The drought affected

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about half the country, according to the NOAA. Nearly 30 states experienced below-average rainfall.

But enough “chatter” about the weather. Let’s discuss how superintendents dealt with the challenges brought on by formidable Mother Nature. Better yet, in light of those challenges, let’s ask superintendents what they learned from this golf season of discontent. Below, they share their trials, tribulations and, most importantly, their enlightenments.

A little brown ... is OK

Every summer, the thunderstorms come to Bend, Ore., like reruns return to TV. “They are traditional in June, July and August,” says Jerry Palmerton, superintendent of Widgi Creek GC in Bend.

But not last June, July and August. “We had one thunderstorm in 70 days,” Palmerton says.

Normally, Palmerton counts on the summer rains to “get you back to even as far as your irrigation is concerned.” The rain rejuvenates the course’s dry spots. “You’re not counting on running the irrigation system every night to keep the course healthy,” Palmerton adds.

But when the rains didn’t come, Palmerton had to turn on the irrigation system. Sometimes, he didn’t turn it off soon enough. “There were days we put too much water on the course, and its playability got away from us,” Palmerton says.

Some areas on the course were soaked. That, combined with golf car traffic, led to damaged turf and eventual turf loss.

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EYEWIRE

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Palmerton explains that he's always been one to manage for aesthetics and playability. "But we got to a point where I was trying to focus more on the aesthetics than the playability, and the golf course was too wet."

If the thunderstorms don't show next year or any year after, Palmerton won't overirrigate to ensure the course is green and lush. He learned a lesson this past summer. "It's OK to allow a little brown out there," he says.

Asking for trouble

"We're still in a drought," says Chris Ayers, whose course is located near Washington, D.C. "Depending on where you're located in Maryland, you're probably 9 inches to 14 inches below normal rainfall for the last 12 months."

Courses in the area with bentgrass/*Poa annua* pushup greens, including Lakewood CC, took a beating from the heat, Ayers says. Several of Lakewood's greens suffered from bacterial wilt and lost turf.

"When your greens go bad, it doesn't matter how good the rest of your course looks," Ayers says. "Everybody looks at the greens. Trying to recoup lost grass has been very difficult."

Ayers isn't surprised that Lakewood's greens are suffering, especially when he considers that he and his staff worked to have the course in peak condition for three member/guest tournaments during a two-week span in July. That meant they were verticutting, topdressing and rolling greens — all of which stress the turf — a few weeks before the hottest and most brutal part of the summer. "It was not long after the member/guest tournaments concluded that our golf course began to head south," Ayers affirms.



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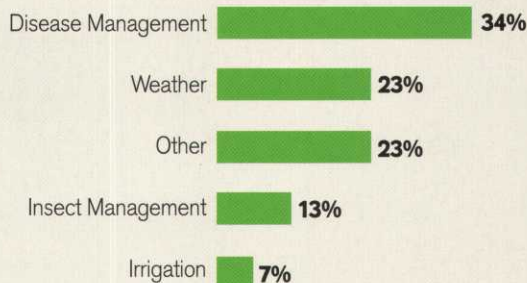
ALLAN PULASKI
THE LANDINGS CLUB

From this difficulty, Ayers learned that scheduling the member/guest tournaments so close together during a sweltering time of the year is a bad idea.

"It's not conducive to having a healthy golf course to last through the season," Ayers says. "We need to rearrange the golf schedule to allow the course to peak at a different time."

The good news for Lakewood and Ayers is the course will close next summer for a renovation, including installation

What Are The Top Agronomic Concerns At Your Course?



Golfdom

of USGA greens. There will be no more bentgrass/*Poa annua* greens for the heat and humidity to push around.

Still, Ayers is trying to change the member/guest tournament schedule in the coming years. Thankfully, he says Lakewood's members agree with him that peaking the golf course in mid-July is only asking for trouble.

When the rain comes

For two years, Tom Alex fought to keep the turf alive amid a severe drought in central Florida. But last summer, Alex, director of golf course maintenance for the Grand Cypress GC in Orlando, watched his course get deluged with rain — about 60 inches from June through mid-September. The area usually receives about 58 inches of rain annually. "We went from one extreme to the other — from hand-watering and using wetter agents to pumping water off the course and installing new drainage," Alex says.

By mid-June, many of Alex's employees were working on drainage projects because of the heavy rains. "We were into so many drainage projects that we were taking guys away from normal maintenance procedures. We had to dry up the course so people could play."

Alex and his crew learned a lesson from the hard rain.

"New drainage has to be installed when it's dry, not when it's wet," he says. "We were trying to put new drainage in, and we had water flowing in ditches. They were caving in, and it was a big nuisance."

Ironically, Alex admits he delayed drainage upgrades because the weather was dry. He figured the crew would get to the projects in time. But when the rains came, they had to deal with the consequences.

Next time, Alex vows not to wait too long.

Overseeding nightmare

Very low humidity and cooler nighttime temperatures caused Phoenix and Scottsdale, Ariz., superintendents some agronomic headaches. Because of the weather, their courses' bermudagrass could never get on track, says Mark Clark, certified superintendent of Troon Golf & CC in Scottsdale, Ariz.

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Bermudagrass requires about a week to 10 days of hot and humid nights where the temperature doesn't drop below 85 degrees F to thrive and establish itself, Clark points out.

"The low humidity favored the ryegrass," he says. "The ryegrass became more aggressive and outcompeted the bermudagrass, so there was poor transition."

For some courses, the situation worsened as the summer progressed and became more hot and humid. The ryegrass, which had overtaken the weakened bermudagrass, died in August.

"Some courses were 80 percent ryegrass and 20 percent bermuda going into August," Clark says. "It should be the exact opposite."

How do you combat it? "That's the \$64,000 question," Clark says.

Clark knows one answer, but it's a difficult decision for superintendents to make. Superintendents could stop overseeding with ryegrass. (In fact, some Arizona superintendents have ceased overseeding because of water restrictions.) "If you don't overseed, it certainly will be better for the bermudagrass, which handles lack of rain better than ryegrass," Clark says.

Superintendents could also oversee lighter amounts. "Then the bermuda won't be torn out as much," Clark points out.

The drought has also affected Arizona golf courses. Yeah, it's supposed to be dry in Arizona. "But we depend on some rain to make a difference," Clark says.

From October 2001 through this October, the Scottsdale area received a shade under 2 inches of rain. The area usually receives about 7 inches of rain annually.



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LAKEWOOD CC

Little rain posed problems for superintendents who irrigate with effluent water, Clark says. The rain is needed to wash away the salt that gets built up on the turf from the effluent.

Clark and his staff flushed the course more often, used more wetting agents and increased aerification to combat the salt buildup. "We did all of those things, but still didn't yield a very good golf course."

This winter, assuming the drought will continue, Clark says he'll continue to treat for salt buildup. "But if you get the normal amount of rainfall, it's usually enough to move the salt [through the soil] to prevent any turf damage."

Is This Heaven?

We asked Travis Jantzer, superintendent of Cedar Links GC in Medford, Ore., to get his take on the wild weather of 2002.

Most every superintendent we spoke to said the past golf season was one of the most — if not the most — challenging in their careers because of difficulties brought on by the inconsistent weather, mainly the drought.

Jantzer, however, says Mother Nature didn't throw him any nasty curve balls. After you read his comments, you'll probably be looking for a job tending turf in Medford.

"Since I'm located in southern Oregon's Rouge Valley, I'm able to enjoy a unique climate," Jantzer says. "We have four very distinct seasons that show very little change from year to year."

It did get a tad hot and humid, Jantzer admits, but not scorching hot and humid like it was in New Jersey and other Eastern states in late July, where it was no fun to be a superintendent.

"Our summer hot spell did last a little longer than normal and the humidity rose a little," Jantzer says. "The rise in humidity did trigger a little fungus, but I only had to treat one green because of it."

Jantzer also didn't have to deal with any water restrictions.

"The Medford Irrigation District was able to keep feeding my irrigation pond until Oct. 1," Jantzer says. "Our water levels have been very good this year."

At least a difficult Mother Nature spared at least one superintendent.

— Larry Aylward, Editor

A veteran superintendent, Clark has learned to be a realist, especially when it comes to Mother Nature. Sometimes it's difficult to react in a timely fashion to some turf problems brought on by weather. "If we stay in a prolonged drought, you're going to see the quality of the golf courses go down around here," he says matter of factly.

About your irrigation system

Steubenville CC, near Pittsburgh, didn't escape the drought's impact. The fact that the humidity was unseasonably low made it even worse. "The moisture was sucked right out of the soil," says Don Abraham, superintendent of the track.

Abraham says he saw more localized dry spot and fairy ring than usual. "We used more wetting agents this summer than ever before. Our chemical budget was up, obviously."

If there's one thing Abraham learned, it's to make sure components of the course's irrigation system are functioning efficiently — before the onslaught of a drought.

"Many superintendents around here, including myself, had problems with nozzles and weren't getting good coverage with sprinklers," Abraham says. "In a drought like this, that can show up fast. (I learned) that I need to check the irriga-

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tion system early in the season to make sure the nozzles are working properly.”

Ron Ross, certified superintendent of Quarry Oaks GC in Ashland, Neb., learned that and more. Ross has dealt with severe heat and humidity before, but not as intense as the furnace-like weather he experienced last summer.

Quarry Oaks is only five years old and features a state-of-the-art irrigation system that works as smooth as Phil Mickelson's golf swing. Never mind that, however. When it's that hot, Ross says, you must watch your entire irrigation operation closely, no matter how new and efficient it is.

“We made darn sure it was programmed correctly and doing what we wanted it to do in the middle of the night,” Ross says. “If we missed one irrigation cycle at night, we might have had some major problems.”

Dealing with extremes

In late May and early June, it rained 17 out of 20 days at Locust Hill CC in Rochester, N.Y.

“It was an extremely wet spring,” says Rick Slattery, Locust Hill's superintendent. “At times, we had to hand mow parts of the fairways because we couldn't put any heavy equipment on them.”

Then, in late June, the drought arrived.

“We started a streak of heat and humid days that was utterly brutal,” Slattery says. “I've been a superintendent in the Northeast for a long time, and I've never seen the extended amount of hot and high humid days that we had this year. At one point, the course's weather station registered 32 out of 38 days that were 89 degrees or above.”

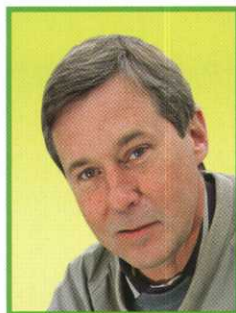
The wet spring and sultry summer combined to create disease pressure that Slattery had never experienced before on a golf course. And the disease spread fast.

“I needed an array of fungicides to keep the diseases suppressed,” he says. “I normally spend \$15,000 to \$20,000 on fungicides a year. This year I spent about \$8,000 more. I had to.”

Slattery learned that his more than 30 years of experience as a superintendent was crucial to his ability to make quick decisions for the sake of preserving the course's turf.

“I called upon my years of experience in the business more this year than I ever have before,” he says. “The experience I had to use most was my irrigation knowledge. When there's dry weather combined with high humidity, irrigation becomes critical. It's very easy to overwater in such a situation, and too much water can mean disease problems.”

Even though he's several hundred miles south of Rochester, Allan Pulaski, director of golf course and grounds maintenance at The Landings Club in Savannah, Ga., can empathize with Slattery when it comes to extremes. His situation was reversed, though. The Landings Club, which has six golf courses, received little rain in the spring and first half of the summer, but then the floodgates opened in late August. “We had so



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RICK SLATTERY
LOCUST HILL CC
OWNERS ASSOCIATION

much rain one week that we weren't able to mow any of the courses,” Pulaski says.

The rain continued in the fall. In late October, Pulaski and his crew finally finished overseeding the courses. It took three weeks instead of one because the crew had to deal with 7.5 inches of rain in 10 days.

Pulaski was calm and collected, though, about the matter. He says he's learned not to worry about the things he can't control, like buckets of rain during overseeding. He says his secret is to prepare for nasty weather and the difficulties it may bring ahead of time. “So when the time comes, I'm ready to act, instead of react.”

Perseverance pays

A superintendent's state of mind is not spared by a drought, a torrential rain or anything else that might cause him or her a major headache on the golf course. Just ask Abraham of Steubenville CC. By the end of the summer, he was stressed to the max because of the drought. But he was cool and composed upstairs.

“You never realize how much you can put up with until you're pushed,” he says. “I learned that I'm very resilient. You have to be.”

Slattery, too, says the season helped him develop more mental toughness.

“There are times when you don't want to do it anymore and you feel like giving up,” he says. “But you find inner strength and keep going.”

Ross said the drought and heat had his staff a little more grouchy than usual. That's understandable. But Ross and his staff also persevered. Despite the arid weather, Ross says Quarry Oaks played well and looked great.

The summer of 2002 also presented Ross with a measuring stick of sorts. He'll compare future sizzling summers with the past scorching summer. “This was the summer we'll be gauging the other summers by,” he says.

But Ross and other superintendents hope a similar summer doesn't come along for years to come. ■

You can reach Aylward, the author of this article, at lajlward@advanstar.com.