

# Sowing Sand On Fairways

Topdressing improves soil profiles and playability and is not solely the province of top-tier clubs

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Certified superintendent Jon Jennings topdresses his fairways once a month.

CHICAGO GC

### Problems

Like the bears beds in children's story, *Goldilocks*, Chicago GC's fairways were too soft, and Hudson National's fairways were too hard. Both superintendents had to make their fairways just right.

### Solution

Topdressing the fairways once a month during the growing season solved both clubs' problems.

**M**ost superintendents accept the idea of topdressing greens as a necessary part of keeping them healthy. It builds a healthier soil profile by controlling thatch, while also helping to level and smooth the greens.

It takes a lot more effort, however, to convince superintendents that they should extend the practice to their fairways. When they calculate cost per acre, many say it's too costly.

Two superintendents, however, decided it was essential to topdress their fairways to solve opposite problems. They say the costs involved are more than worth the better playing conditions the practice brings, and there are ways for superintendents without unlimited budgets to do it (see sidebar).

### The problems

The midnight black soil beneath the Chicago GC is left over from an earlier time. Before the course was built, farmers toiled for backbreaking hours to coax a living from the ground that now lies beneath the course. It's nutrient-rich and descends 3.5 feet below the surface of the club's fairways. Most backyard vegetable gardeners would kill to have soil that good.

Which would be marvelous if certified superintendent Jon Jennings were looking to grow corn, tomatoes or some other food crop on the land. Unfortunately, such soil makes growing the turf he is nurturing more difficult because the soil holds water like it's gold.

"The loamy soil here has a tendency to hold water," Jennings says. "That turns several of the fairways into soggy messes. We had to find a way to fix that problem."

Gregg Stanley, certified superintendent at Hudson National in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., had the opposite problem at his course. Hudson National was built entirely on rock, so the fairways were incredibly hard.

"Topsoil doesn't exist on this course," Stanley says. "We had to do something to create a growing medium for the turf."

### The solutions

Jennings says he inherited a topdressing program that the club had started in 1999. He says he wanted to control thatch, create a firmer playing surface between drain lines and level the fairways. The latter was important so he could mow the fairways at lower heights without scalping.

"We felt that if we created a sand cap on top of the soil, we could get the water off the surface more quickly after a hard rain," Jennings says. "It doesn't make the water go away, but it creates a buffer zone for the water to sit in before it works its way down into the heavier soil beneath. It makes it much easier to maintain the turf."

He says the initial program is designed to run for three to four years until a sand base is established. Consistency is the key, Jennings says.

"It's not a good idea to enter into this program half-heartedly," Jennings says. "You're not going to get the full benefits unless you topdress consistently, which for us is once a month."

He also says superintendents should make sure they have multiple staging areas where the topdresser can pick up sand on the course. The intense maintenance, however, does come at a price. Jennings says it costs him \$201.58 per acre to topdress his 37 acres of fairways. Jennings says he spends \$33,000 per year on materials alone.

"It started being too expensive for us to do all 18 fairways, so we started focusing on our six wettest fairways this year," Jennings says. "If you do have problem soils under your course, however, topdressing is a great way to address them."

Stanley didn't need to firm his fairways at all because Hudson National, located 30 miles north of New York, was built completely on rock.

"They had to use dynamite on every hole to build the course," Stanley says. "We had to supplement it in some way. We had no percolation at all."

The crew at Hudson National starts topdressing the fairways each spring as soon as the ground allows them to do so, Stanley says. Stanley and his staff topdress the fairways once a



## What About the Little Guy?

Randy DuFault, sales manager at Dakota Peat and Equipment, has the following tips for superintendents who'd like to topdress their fairways but fear they can't afford it:

### Purchase a multitasking machine.

"If you can budget for an applicator that can be used across a number of jobs instead of just topdressing, it will be easier to get budgetary approval," DuFault says. "The number of different jobs the new machines allow you to do is amazing."

### Buy a wider application machine.

"When you go to purchase the equipment, make sure you buy a spreader wide enough to accommodate fairway topdressing," DuFault says. "If you purchase one that's too small, the labor costs will explode because it will take workers longer to do the job."

### Focus only on the fairways about which you hear consistent complaints.

"Even the wealthier clubs don't topdress all of their fairways," DuFault says. "Pick the ones that give you trouble consistently and treat only those."

### Topdress once or twice a year instead of every month.

"There's no rule that says you have to topdress every month," DuFault says. "Every little bit helps. If you can only afford to do it twice a year, that's better than not doing it at all."

### Outsource the job entirely.

"There are companies across the country who are getting into this business," DuFault says. "See if there's one in your area you can hire for a reasonable price. It will save you from having to make the capital investment yourself!"

month from May to October.

The course uses 1,200 tons of sand per year to cover 20 acres of fairway at a cost of \$20 per ton (that works out to approximately 9 to 10 tons of sand per acre per month). Materials cost \$24,000.

"You handle the topdressing of fairways the same way you'd handle greens," Stanley says. "You do it at a rate that equals the growth rate."

Stanley, who started his topdressing program in 1998, says the effects were evident immediately. He says the fairways are much softer than they were when the course opened, and they're far more consistent. He added that the percolation has increased only "a little" since he started the program, but he believes it will get better.

Stanley moves the sand throughout the course in dump trucks and applies it with a Tycrop MH-400. At the moment, he has built a 2-inch layer of sand under the turf, and he plans to continue until he reaches the 4-inch mark.

"We're halfway there," Stanley says. "During the growing season, it does a fabulous job of reducing thatch and keeping the playing conditions consistent. We've been really happy with the results." ■

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**Real-Life Solution**  
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