

Tips

Core Aerification

Superintendents from around the country explain how to do it quickly, cleanly and without much complaining from golfers

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.

Managing Editor

Aerification is one of the most difficult tasks you have to complete each year. You know you have to do it to keep greens healthy, but you dread having to explain the process and its necessity to golfers. Besides, it means extra work for you and your crew that has to be shoehorned into an already packed schedule.

"There's this misperception out there among golfers that superintendents love to aerify, but we hate it, too," says Charles Hadwick, superintendent at the Country Club of Lincoln (Neb.). "It's a lot of extra work, but it has to be done."

Here are some tips from superintendents around the country on how to get through this painful process as quickly and cleanly as possible.

■ Use every opportunity to communicate with golfers before starting

Rick Tatum, superintendent at Grey Oaks GC in Naples, Fla., doesn't feel golfers will understand the importance of aerification even if superintendents take the time to explain it to them — but he still thinks you ought to try.

"Aerification is a necessary evil, and you have to find unusual ways to explain it to golfers," Tatum says. "I like using analogies that my members can relate to."

Tatum says one of his favorites is to compare what aerification does for turf to what vacations do for some rock stars take after long concert tours.

"After weeks and weeks of hard work, rock stars need to recover," Tatum says.

"Turf is the same way, and aerification allows it to do that."

Don't limit your attempts to communicate to one forum, says Richard Rhodes, certified superintendent of Skyland GC in Hinckley, Ohio. The more avenues you use to get your message out, the more likely the message will sink in.

"Use your Web site, newsletter or whatever other means you have to communicate with your members to tell them about the importance of aerification," Rhodes says. "Explain to them their greens won't be much to putt on without aerification. That's how you should start their education."

■ Be flexible about schedules

Superintendents shouldn't set rigid schedules about aerification because it will only get them into trouble, Hadwick says.

"You want to do it on a regular basis, but you can't really say that you're going to do it every second week of the month come hell or high water," Hadwick says. "You have to work with the golf profes-

sional to make sure your schedule matches with special tournaments or any promotions he or she has."

Weather also plays a huge role in determining ideal aerification times, so superintendents shouldn't lock themselves too tightly into a preset schedule, Rhodes says. He recommends waiting until the sun is shining to start.

For an 18-hole golf course, Tatum and Rhodes recommend closing nine holes at a time to aerify. Rhodes says he usually does his aerification over a two-day period.

■ Don't be scared to dig deep

Hadwick says aerification will inevitably anger golfers, so superintendents might as dig up as much soil as possible when they do it. The more soil you bring up when you aerify, the healthier the greens will be in the long run.

"We're going to make the golfers mad, so we might as well make them as mad as possible," Hadwick says, laughing. "It's a disruptive process, but

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the golfers will like the results. I use as large tines as possible because I believe they do the most good.”

Not everyone agrees with Hadwick's assessment. Mark Claburn, superintendent at The Golf Club at Bradshaw Farm in Woodstock, Ga., says he uses three-eighth inch tines every three weeks.

“When you use the smaller tines, holes aren't a problem,” Claburn says. “I haven't had a complaint about aerification in three years.”

■ Eliminate plugs immediately

Whether you blow the cores off the turf surface or remove them with a core harvester, the process should be done as soon as you're done aerifying. Claburn opts for the blowing-off method, whereas Tatum harvests his with a machine.

Tatum recommends that superintendents leave the holes open for 24 hours, but they should irrigate the area to prevent it from drying out.

“You can burn out the grass pretty quickly if you don't watch your P's and Q's with newly aerified areas,” Tatum says. “Putting down enough water will ensure quicker recovery, which means fewer complaints.”

■ Topdress as soon as possible

Practices vary, but there is one thing superintendents agree on when it comes to aerification: Topdressing is essential to minimizing golfer complaints. Rhodes says the goal is to fill the holes up completely so they putt smoothly for the first group out the next day.

“You have to be careful about making sure they're filled completely,” Rhodes says. “You have to go out there yourself and look at them to make sure they're

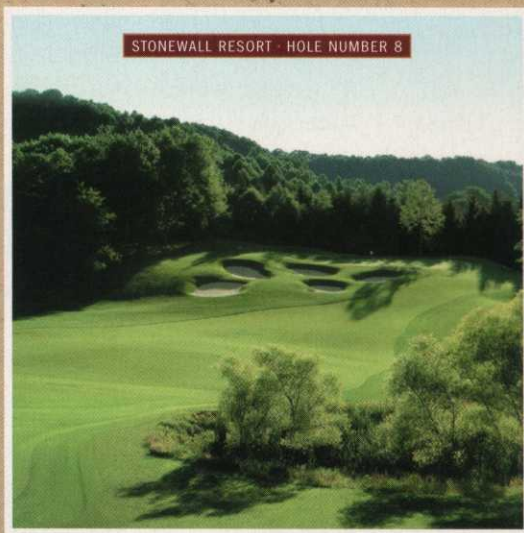
filled properly. After you've done this for a while, you'll be able to tell by sight.”

Some superintendents prefer a light topdressing program to fill the holes, but Tatum says he prefers to put down the heaviest application he can and then drag the green with a steel drag mat. Then he comes back in five to six days to topdress again.

“The focus is to fill all the holes — period,” Tatum says. “That will flatten out the surface more quickly.”

No matter what program you decide to use at your course, Hadwick says superintendents shouldn't hurry the process in response to golfer complaints.

“There's nothing in a can and no magic that you can use to relieve compaction on your greens,” Hadwick says. “Take your time and do the job right. That's the best way to make sure your aerification goes smoothly.” ■



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