



REVEALING THE **SPIN** ON Topdressing

By Thomas Skernivitz Managing Editor

Although fairly simple by nature, topdressing has evolved significantly in recent years.

Not long ago superintendents were setting aside only two days all year to topdress with heavy applications. “They’d aerate the greens and then bury them with sand,” says Kevin Clayton, a regional sales manager with TyCrop.

Later, with the United States Golf Association (USGA) imposing its greens guidelines, the chore became semi-monthly or even weekly, albeit with lighter applications. Meticulous superintendents, to assure that treatments weren’t applied too heavily, would spend

good chunks of time using a walking fertilizer spreader on each green.

Technology soon came to the rescue. Companies such as Dakota Peat and Equipment, Turfco and TyCrop began making topdressers with spinners that guaranteed light but widespread applications. Today superintendents and their greenskeepers can cover one green in just two or three passes and all 18 greens in 90 minutes.

“It’s all about getting it done,” says Scott Kinkead, Turfco’s executive vice president.

Getting it done correctly goes a long way, too. Here are 10 topdressing tips, courtesy of the major manufacturers:

1 Fine-tune the presets: Even light applications can result in the greens

having to be dragged or brushed clean. But if the angle of the spinners and the speed of the belt and spinners are set correctly before hitting the greens, that need is erased.

“You can get it light enough that you can just literally turn on the irrigation for a brief run, and you won’t have to do any dragging,” Kinkead says.

Especially important is the angle of the spinners. Turfco’s products allow a range between 0 degrees and 15 degrees. Set correctly, the spinners can “drive” the topdressing into the turf canopy instead of allowing it to accumulate on the surface.

“The other value is that if it’s a windy day, you can angle the spinners down so you’re not just throwing sand out to the wind,” Kinkead says.

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2 Pick what works ... and stick with it: Upon determining the correct topdresser settings, maintain them from green to green and don't change "on the fly," Kinkead says.

"If you slow (the spinner speed) down, you've just thickened the application. If you speed it up, you've just thinned out the application," he says.

Likewise, superintendents, once they've picked the topdressing material that best suits their course, should stick with that material and the supplier. "You don't want to have different types of material that you're utilizing," Kinkead says. "You can lock up the greens."

Clayton recommends taking a core sample and having it analyzed in order to develop a proper topdressing program.

"A lot of guys will start topdressing and they won't have any idea why they're doing it; they just heard it's a good idea," he says. "But if you put the wrong type of material down, you can create layers and more of a problem for your roots not being able to penetrate the profile."

3 Pick truck-mount or tow-behind: Each mode of delivery has its positives and negatives. A topdresser that is mounted to the back of a utility vehicle is ideal for maneuvering around courses that feature tight greens. Unfortunately, Kinkead notes, more often than not the utility vehicle becomes "married" to the topdressing machine and remains mounted all year.

What a tow-behind topdresser might lack in maneuverability, it makes up for in simplicity. "All you do is drop the pin in and go," Kinkead says.

4 Floor it: Some topdressing machines — truck-mounted or tow-behind — rely on the hydraulics of a pull-unit such as a Toro Workman or John Deere Pro Gator. So, whoever is operating the pull-unit has to shift down and hold the accelerator to the floor while in the process of topdressing.

"We've got a lot of people that say, 'God, this thing doesn't topdress very

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AND EQUIPMENT



well,' and we find out they're just idling across the green and their hydraulics don't have enough hydraulic pressure to flow," Randy Dufault, sales manager with Dakota Peat and Equipment, says. "The spinners will be going fast and slow, fast and slow. It won't be a great spread."

5 Kick the tires: As with their personal vehicles, superintendents should occasionally inspect their topdressers. Some of the parts to focus upon, Kinkead says, are the filters, belts and spinner veins. "Just give them a quick visual," he says.

6 Insta-load: The most time-consuming element of topdressing can be the transport and loading of materials. The solution is a loader that shadows the topdressing unit. Whereas a typical topdresser has a capacity of 1 cubic yard, companies offer follow-behind units that can hold up to 4 cubic yards of material.

"That can really decrease the amount of time it takes to topdress," Kinkead says. "Especially if the maintenance shed is far away."

7 Know your routes: In order to prevent overlapped or overlooked areas of turf, a strategy should literally be mapped out in advance. "Look at the greens and

how you want to enter and exit them," Kinkead says.

8 Ride the straight and narrow: It's important to maintain a straight line while traveling on the greens. Wide turns, especially while driving mounted units, can result in tire tracks.

"As soon as you're going to go across the green, you shift down, floor it and go straight," Dufault says. "You can make little turns, but try to keep the lines straight. Turn around (off the green), line it up again and go straight back."

Making tracks is also something to be wary of when topdressing a fairway with a four-wheel-drive tractor. "Always make sure the front wheels are in two-wheel drive," Dufault says. "If you have the front wheels in four-wheel-drive, when you turn it kind of scruffs and tears the turf."

9 Remember to spin: It's a simple mistake, but operators do forget to turn on the spinners. This leaves lines of unscattered sand along the green. "What I like to do is leave the spinners running," Dufault says. "Make sure it's the first thing you turn on and the last thing you turn off."

Doing so has an added benefit. When loading a topdresser, excess sand tends to spill onto the spinners and belt. When the machine is first turned on, there's a "big whoosh of sand," Dufault says, one that you don't want to land on a green.

"So what I like to do is turn the spinners on before I get to the green so that that whoosh just goes out into the fairway and you don't see it," he says.

10 Hold off on the Stimpmeter: It takes some time for topdressing to take effect, so it's best to wait until the material is incorporated into the canopy before re-measuring green speed.

"If they check their speed and then they topdress and then they check their speed right away, most times the speed is actually going to go down right away," Clayton says. "But if they leave it a couple of days to let the material incorporate into the canopy, then all of the sudden the ball speed goes up." ■