

Grains of Truth

Knowing your members,
club schedule is crucial
for your topdressing program

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

Got anthracnose? As the third-most prevalent fungal disease on golf courses, many superintendents battle it on at least a couple of their greens. Many believe its onset and spread is perpetuated by the stress from creating good golfing conditions, so superintendents might be making it worse by just doing their jobs.

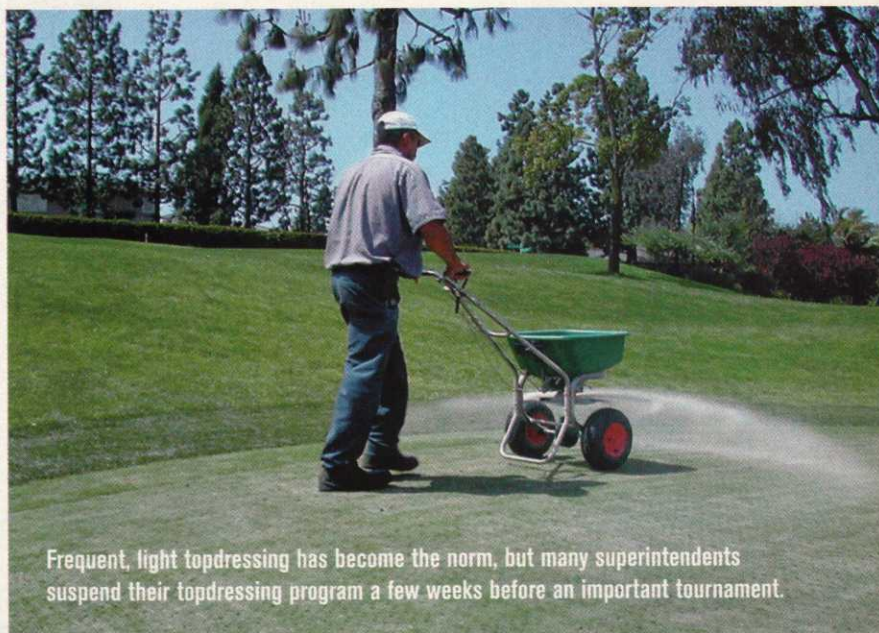
Consequently, reducing crew traffic on affected greens during hot and humid months can help mitigate the risk of the disease by avoiding scuffs on the plant that could make it more susceptible.

That's why many superintendents halt their topdressing programs in the dog days of summer despite the growing trend toward lighter, more frequent applications.

"In the hot weather, our primary concern in terms of disease is anthracnose, so when it starts to get hot out, we stop topdressing because it is going to dull the mowers and create abrasions on the plant that make infection points," says Kevin Seibel, superintendent of the Century Country Club in Purchase, N.Y.

Century had a history of anthracnose on its bentgrass/*Poa annua* greens before Seibel arrived about four years ago. The outbreaks have all but stopped, which he attributes partly to his topdressing protocols.

Even the prestigious Hazeltine National Golf Club, which hosted the 2006 U.S.



Frequent, light topdressing has become the norm, but many superintendents suspend their topdressing program a few weeks before an important tournament.

Amateur Championship in late August, didn't do much topdressing this year because of anthracnose, says Jim Nicol, its certified golf course superintendent.

"We've seen anthracnose blossom, but it seemed to kick up this year, and on different greens, because of the way we maintain them," says Nicol, whose course will host the 2009 PGA Championship. "If I were to get back on to what I was doing, I would do it lightly every once in a while [every other week or so]."

While frequent, light topdressing is becoming the norm, there are times it can be a detriment, such as before an invitational or member-guest tournament.

Rick Slattery stops topdressing about three weeks before his annual Wegmans Rochester International LPGA Tournament at Locust Hill Country Club in Pittsford, N.Y. He says the material needs time to work into the soil profile before it can help the surface and allow the mowers to achieve a quality cut.

"I've found that the greens will slow up a little bit just after topdressing," he says. "If

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you are going to have sand on the green for seven to 10 days, then you are going to have dull mowers and really slow, fluffy greens."

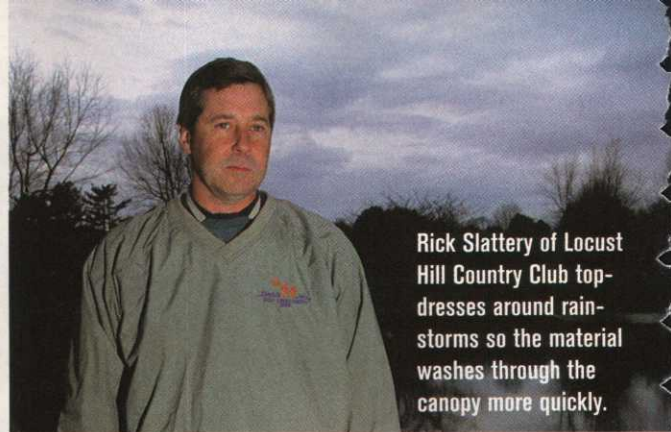
With a mid-June tournament and 500 active golfing members raring to go as soon as he pulls the gallery ropes, Slattery says he can't really afford a week of slow, fluffy greens. So he seldom topdresses without a looming rainstorm.

Many superintendents brush or drag material into the canopy, and some irrigate in addition. But Slattery lets summer storms wash material down into the canopy, which he says avoids a week of dull mowers caused by surface sand and subsequent slow greens. He topdresses every few weeks, but he's not afraid to wait a few more days if there is rain in the forecast.

And he knows he needs the results on his greens.

Slattery doesn't like to aerate in the spring for fear the greens won't be ready for the mid-June tournament. "And if there is a lot of heat and humidity in July, then you are going to want to stay off your greens because the mechanical damage will be worse than any benefit that you'll realize by topdressing them," he says.

That's a double-whammy for thatch buildup. So he aerates a couple times in the fall to catch up, and he topdresses lightly in the spring in conjunction with a solid pencil-tine treatment.



Rick Slattery of Locust Hill Country Club topdresses around rainstorms so the material washes through the canopy more quickly.

Closer mowing heights and lighter, more-frequent nitrogen applications have helped mitigate thatch buildup for many golf courses. But the lower the cut, the more noticeable imperfections in the green, which is why most courses have adopted topdressing programs during the past couple decades.

"Topdressing is important when you mow at one-tenth of an inch for tournament conditions to get them around 12 or 13 [on the Stimpmeter]. When you are maintaining those speeds, you really need true greens because the ball will bounce around a little more when you bring your heights down," Slattery says.

It's unlikely golfers will enjoy playing follow the bouncing ball during their Saturday morning round, so topdressing is crucial despite some common-sense limitations.

Ken Flisek, certified golf course superintendent of The Club at Nevillewood (Pa.), says his greens are about the best they've been

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in his 15-year tenure thanks to an aggressive dethatching program.

"Members told me this year the greens are better than ever, and I think a more aggressive aerification has helped along with the more frequent, lighter topdressing," Flisek says.

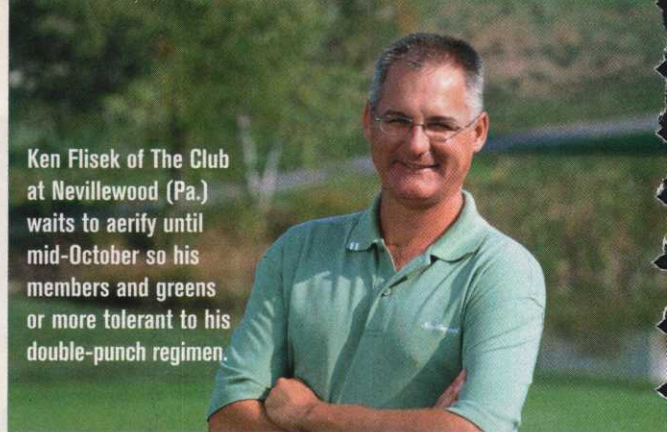
He says he is able to topdress about six times in the spring and about four times in the fall, taking a break during the mid-summer heat. By September, he has the best greens of the year, so he lets members enjoy them by not aerifying until mid-October.

The late punch also allows him to go deep and alter his soil with more conducive material. His greens were built from coarser sand, and with the low mowing heights of today, he's had to go with smaller material for his topdressing, which is typically taboo for fear of locking up soil with smaller particles. But with an aggressive 12-inch, deep-tine treatment along with a core process, he has a better chance of working it well into the composition.

"The newer, finer material is in columns down through the green's profile," he says. "Now that we switched to the finer sand, I'm worried about having the finer layer on top, which is why I'm poking the deep holes and filling them with new sand before we do the core."

Flisek says he wouldn't be permitted to upset the greens to that extent if he did the process immediately after Labor Day.

Ken Flisek of The Club at Nevillewood (Pa.) waits to aerify until mid-October so his members and greens or more tolerant to his double-punch regimen.

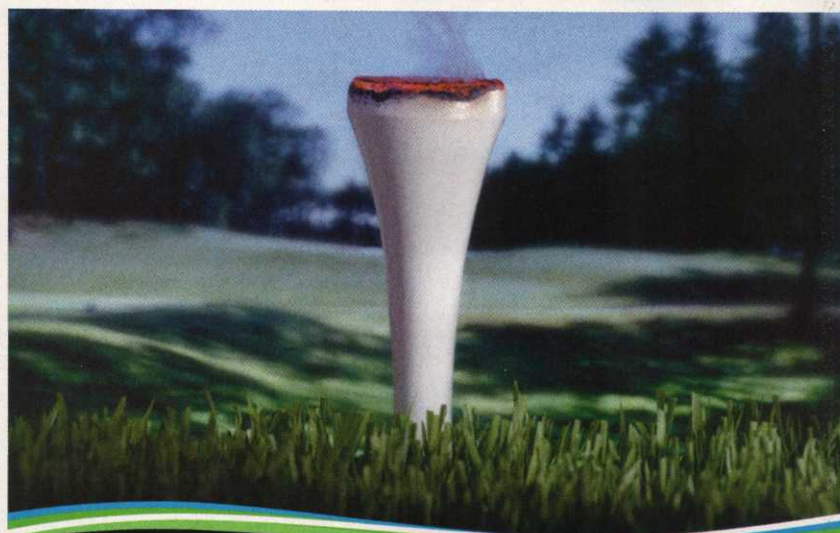


It usually takes him five days to finish the two-step process of deep-tine and core punching, but he wasn't in a big rush in late October because golf at that time is a bonus.

"When we wait until this time of year, the members are more forgiving, and the grass is more forgiving," he said in late October. "We won't mow the greens for an entire week after we aerify. If you do that in September, you kind of get in trouble. Right now, no one really seems to care."

It makes sense from a player's perspective, considering September is some of the nicest golf weather, Flisek says. And it's a vantage point he uses often. A five-handicapper, Flisek tries to play the course as often as he can with members of different skill levels so he can get a realistic view of what golfers think of the course.

"When I haven't played in a couple weeks, sometimes I think the golf course is great. But when I play it, I see things that I would do differently, and we start to change things," he says. ■



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TOPDRESSING AT A GLANCE

With many courses donning a heavy layer of topdressing to combat desiccation and crown rot, many superintendents might not be thinking too much about topdressing protocols for next season. But a good regimen requires long-term planning of up to a year, especially for the composting phase, according to "Turf Management for Golf Courses" by James Beard.

Here's a planning checklist to ensure your material and regimen will keep you on target to combat thatch and keep your greens consistent.

| Make sure particle size is at least the size of that used to build the green to reduce the potential of layering. Otherwise, "it's like pouring BBs into a barrel full of baseballs," says Kevin Seibel, superintendent of Century Country Club.

| If you must go finer because the existing

materials are too coarse for the mowing heights, punch deep to allow the finer material to sit in columns through the profile. "It's important to get some deep-line channels down through the profile so it's not one layer on top of the other," says Ken Flisek, superintendent of The Club at Nevillewood.

| Particles should be tested for uniformity and composition; sand should be clean and have a high silica content. "You want a very hard material because you don't want your sand breaking down and plugging up your profile," says Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill Country Club.

| Avoid excessive abrasions during hot, humid weather, which might invite anthracnose or other disease.

| Work around rainstorms so the material works its way below the mower blades more quickly.

| Tread lightly. You can always repeat the process in a few days if it was too light. Otherwise, "you might have to live with it a couple weeks. Sometimes it just won't go away. You can roll it, water it, brush it, and it still sticks around. It's a little trial and error," says Dan Williams, superintendent of Riverview Country Club in Appleton, Wis.

| Consider a storage silo or a place to keep your material dry. "You are paying a premium for the process of baking and kiln drying, so you need a dry place to store it," Seibel says.

| Know what you want to accomplish, says Sam Ferro, president of Turf Diagnostics and Design. A successful program requires goals, knowledge of physical properties of existing soil as well as the proposed topdress.

— David Frabotta, Senior Editor

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