

Ron Furlong likes to spoonfeed greens on a regular basis.

It's tempting to reduce nitrogen levels on greens to keep them smooth and fast — but not at the sake of jeopardizing their health for four days of glory

Tournament Prep & Fertility

BY RON FURLONG,
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HAVING GOLF COURSES PRIMED for Major tournaments makes for great theater. This past year, all three courses that hosted majors in the United States — Augusta National, Bethpage Black and Hazeltine National — were all in phenomenal shape, and it showed on our high-definition television screens as well as with the players' comments who, almost man for man, raved about each course.

Although most superintendents will

never get to host a Major, it's exciting when an opportunity comes along every now and then to primp your course for some special event and give it the old Augusta touch for a week. I received such an opportunity this past summer, hosting a PGA qualifier for the Pacific Northwest. It was fun to deck out the course for the four-day event and present the best possible "PGA Tourney" conditions we could.

However, what I soon came to realize, while prepping for the event, was

just how stressful such conditions would be on the course and, specifically, the greens. And, upon further realization, I realized how important turfgrass fertility would be, combined with all the other management factors, in the quick recovery of the turfgrass from the stress we would be heaping upon it.

The “other management factors” I mentioned above, excluding fertility, include (but are not limited to) mowing height, rolling, verticutting and topdressing, moisture levels, wetting agents and plant growth regulators.

Here’s a quick rundown of these factors:

■ **Mowing height.** In midsummer, we normally mow our Poa greens at .120. For this event we dropped them to .110. The PGA wanted our greens in the 10.5 range on the Stimpmeter. Any quicker, with our undulations, would’ve been bordering on unfair. We had to be careful not to get them too quick. During the week they Stimped a perfect 10.5 to 11.

■ **Rolling.** Normally (excluding the occasional one-day tourney), we roll every other week. For the qualifier, we rolled each of the four days in conjunction with a mow before each roll.

■ **Verticutting and topdressing.** A week before, we verticut and applied a light topdressing, as we do every second week during the season.

■ **Moisture levels.** We kept the greens on the drier side, electing to hand-water daily while letting the computer water lightly at night. Again, being careful to keep them firm, yet being able to hold a shot.

■ **Wetting agents.** We applied a wetting agent at a lighter than normal rate about nine days before the start of the tournament.

■ **Plant growth regulators.** Normally, we apply Primo Maxx every 20 days. We shortened the interval to 14 days and applied four days before the event.

No other factor is as singlehandedly

important to any golf tournament than the weather. We are all at Mother Nature’s mercy, and must react to whatever she tosses our way. We are like a hitter in the batter’s box as she throws us a curve ball, followed by a tricky slider, followed by a high heater and then, lastly, a wicked change-up. Mother Nature has a nastier change-up than Johan Santana (wonder what the Yankees would pay for her services?).

The change-up she fired at us was the fact that normally, from June 1st to the end of August, we receive an average of 6.5 inches of rain. This year the total was a measly 1.5 inches.

So, all of this brings us to fertility. Obviously, you want to keep the greens somewhat on the lean side heading into a tournament. Lush turf is slow turf. However, you don’t want to caution too far on the lean side, either. Starving Poa often results in a weak plant that has trouble recovering from stress. That

Continued on page 34

Don’t stop fertilizing greens for a tournament to make them fast. To keep them quick, hand-water the greens to keep them on the drier side.





⤴ Have a solid fertility plan going into the tournament. You don't want to jeopardize the future health of the course's greens for four days of glory.

Continued from page 33

wasn't what we wanted, but it can be a tricky line to toe.

Maintaining a slightly lower nitrogen level a couple weeks before and then into the week itself, while perhaps upping the potassium level just slightly, can possibly be a good plan of attack. But replacing those lost carbohydrates in the heat of summer is vital — somehow enhancing the root growth during the time of year when you simply don't have them (long roots, that is).

Mike Erb is a sales representative for Wilbur Ellis in the Greater Seattle area, and a valuable resource for fertility guidance for many superintendents, myself included. Mike agreed with me that having a solid fertility plan going into such an event is the major key, instead of reacting afterward when the damage is most likely already done. You don't want to jeopardize the future health of the greens for four days of glory.

"I wouldn't lower the fertility," Mike told me. "Turn off the irrigation and hand-water for the event. Keep them quick with a plant growth regulator and rolling, but avoid dropping fertility rates. Keep them growing."

Spoon-feeding with low nitrogen levels, like most of us are doing on a regular basis anyway, can be key in providing the best timing for detailed control. This especially holds true for those of us with Poa greens, where it's not uncommon to have upwards of 20 different strains of Poa on one green. The frequent (every two weeks) feeding is essential to maintain, if nothing else, consistency of the playing surface. Biostimulants, which help replenish but don't overstimulate, are another useful tool during such stressful periods, replenishing with gibberellins, cytokinins and auxins.

The disadvantage most courses have when they primp for a special event, compared with a U.S. Open or a PGA Championship course, is we don't get to shut down the greens right after the event. Often, a course hosting a Major, or even hosting a regular annual PGA Tour event, will have the luxury to raise heights, give a good feeding and stop mowing for a few days.

Revenue dictates a different story for most golf clubs. In fact, the day after this four-day event, we had an outside group invade our course with a 27-hole shotgun tournament.

The best plan is to simply have a plan. Have the foresight to understand your greens and how they will be after your big event.

No one knows your greens better than you. Don't mortgage the farm on a single tournament, no matter how important. Get those roots down as deep as you can going into the tournament and hope Mother Nature misses the strike zone with her change-up. Maybe, if you're lucky, she'll groove a batting-practice meatball right over the plate. ■

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