

# The 'Green' Dilemma

Most golfers aren't ready for brown turf — no matter how much they love the environment. What happened at the U.S. Open proved that

**E**ven the most cynical observer who heard incoming United States Golf Association President Jim Hyler's presidential address last February that set forward an aggressive environmentally friendly agenda couldn't have imagined the enormous hurdles the organization faces. Given the public's negative reaction to June's U.S. Open at Pebble Beach Golf Links — the course was in splendid condition but the dried-out greens looked dreadful on television and were criticized by players — it may be time for Hyler and the USGA to re-imagine just how they push for less water usage and more "green" golf courses.

The very word "green" is part of the problem.

**Jim Hyler, pictured here at Pebble Beach, says maintenance expectations must be realistic.**

With all due respect to the folks who understandably can't stomach the notion that marketing drives our culture, it's all in the branding. Green grass is synonymous with over-watering, fertilizer usage and overall excess. Yet while Hyler's call for a sustainable future was beautifully written, elo-

*Continued on page 30*

**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

## The 'Green' Dilemma

*Continued from page 28*

quently delivered and met with rave reviews, it's become clear that the push for "green" needs to be preceded by a more extensive education program about the cost of achieving green and the savings from brown.

Before addressing how to best take advantage of this momentous shift in

USGA philosophy aiming to make a very public case for sustainability (while the USGA Green Section merely continues on its behind-the-scenes efforts as part of its mission), Hyler's remarks are worth revisiting in case you aren't a regular reader of USGA presidential addresses (it's OK, most people aren't).

"In my opinion, many of the stan-

dards by which we construct and maintain our courses have become, quite simply, unsustainable," Hyler told the assembled blue coats. "While there may be short-term solutions, what we need to seek is a long-term strategy that confronts some of the deeper issues plaguing the game."

As for the issue of water, Hyler stated that the game "must reset the way that we look at golf courses."

He pledged the U.S. Open would attempt to continue to emphasize firm, fast "and, yes, even brown, and allow the running game to flourish."

Hyler then said, "We need to understand how brown can become the new green. Our maintenance expectations must be realistic, promoting a more relaxed approach that allows us to reduce our consumption of clean water. A more natural game that is sustainable can be promoted as a more responsible philosophy for maintaining golf courses anywhere. It is certainly not our aspiration to become the game's environmental police, but we can and will develop and encourage best practices relating to sustainable turfgrass management for all clubs and courses to consider."

Great stuff, concise and not hard to understand. Except that it's become painfully clear that golfers not only didn't hear the message, they just aren't ready for brown, no matter how much they love the environment.

Even with an economic downturn that has everyone in the game buzzing about the need to cut back on water and, in general, on certain excessive practices that raise costs, most golfers still aren't prepared for how authentic firm, fast golf looks and plays. While most superintendents reading this are snickering and saying, "No kidding," the rest of the golf world, encouraged about discussions of sustainability, have been shocked by how little the golfing public actually understands or desires "green" golf. And as editors at Golf Di-

*Continued on page 49*

### GETTING IT RIGHT EVERY TIME IS NOW AS EASY AS A-B-C.



Unlimited programming flexibility with three lockable presets.



### INTRODUCING THE WIDESPIN™ 1540 EC TOPDRESSER.

We've made it even easier to get proven, WideSpin™ topdressing application every single time. Our new Electronic Controller gives you unlimited flexibility. Dial in the exact program you want, from light to heavy and everything in between. Just set the rates using presets and superintendent lockout. When your crew goes to work, you'll get the application you want. Guaranteed. And with 30% greater spinner angle, you'll also gain greater control and cover up to 40 feet.

**See all the innovative features of the new WideSpin 1540 EC.  
Call 800-679-8201 for a FREE DVD or to schedule a DEMO.**



[WWW.TURFCO.COM](http://WWW.TURFCO.COM)



## The 'Green' Dilemma

*Continued from page 30*

gest will tell you after receiving hate mail for preaching the cause of better practices, this has become a politically sensitive issue.

Part of the problem is generational. Your residents of The Villages, who have bookshelves stocked with Tom Brokaw books, also love their Arnold Palmer, their palm trees and yes, dark green grass. Their offspring, the dreaded baby boomers, want all of the above plus greens Stimping fast and cut twice a day, if possible. And then you have the white belt-wearing generation, slugging away with the latest \$400 hockey sticks. They've been raised to respect carbon footprints and don't think twice about saving their plastic water bottles for the recycling bin. And the tie that binds them all together into a mass of unforgiving golfers who aren't ready for brown turf and native areas?

High-definition television.

It was rumored and even stated publicly by one USGA staffer that Hyler went so far as to ask NBC to remove green grass-friendly filters from the TV cameras for this year's U.S. Open.

"Absolutely not," Hyler told me just minutes after his first U.S. Open press conference at Pebble Beach. Hyler went on to say he doesn't even know if such filters exist and that he would never go that far with his voluntary role as president. Besides, the good folks at Pebble Beach were already amazing stewards and had the golf course looking well maintained, but certainly on the lean side.

Still, Hyler sent a message at the press conference that was not heard by most golfers.

"You will not see a golf course this week that's brown," he told a packed house of writers who were more interested in the announcement of future venues, including the linky Erin Hills. "Our goal is to provide firm and fast conditions for the championship using careful irrigation management. It's important to remember here at Pebble Beach that the grass is primarily *Poa annua* and perennial ryegrass. And if that grass were to get brown, it would be dead."

Yet, if you talked to any golfers after the championship, that's all they saw. Brown. Dead. Bad.



The first indication I had that the USGA needs to initiate a massive marketing campaign came at this year's Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass, where superintendent Tom Vlach had the greens absolutely perfect despite a brutal winter and cool spring. And, admittedly, the turf looked awful and the ball did bounce a bunch by the time leaders rolled around during the early evening, especially when viewed on a 1080-line television compared with half of that on standard-definition televisions.

For weeks after, all golfers could say when I mentioned having been to the Players? "What was with those greens?"

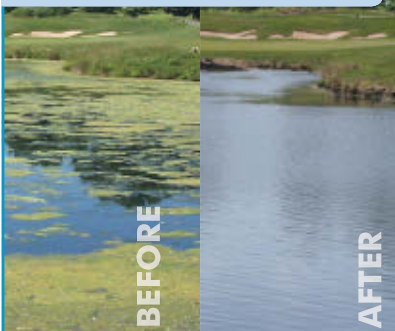
The same questions have dogged me and surely many others since the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach. The excessive peanut gallery chatter even prompted an online essay by the USGA's Pat Gross titled, "Beauty Is In the Eye Of the Beholder."

"The U.S. Open is not about cosmetics," Gross wrote. "It's about providing a challenging and rigorous test to identify the best player. Producing a cosmetically attractive golf course would have been the easy task: a little more water, a touch of fertilizer, and we would have had green, pretty putting greens and soft

*Continued on page 50*

**Given the public's negative reaction to the U.S. Open, it may be time for the USGA to re-imagine how it pushes for more "green" golf courses.**

## Algae Control Without Chemicals!



### Join the Clubs!

“SonicSolutions is a major component of our pond management strategy. For the past several years our irrigation pond has stayed algae free. SonicSolutions has helped us obtain certification status with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program.”

**Matt Ceplo, Superintendent**  
Rockland Country Club, NY

“Within a week or two after start up, the algae in the pond died. Since then, the pond has remained algae free. It is now the cleanest of our six ponds without the use of any chemical algacides.”

**Michael Jr. Rohwer, Superintendent**  
Shadowridge Country Club, CA

“I installed the SonicSolutions units when my ponds already had algae in them. I was completely surprised how quickly they killed the algae and lowered my chlorophyll levels!”

**Gonzalo Vargas**  
Coco Beach Golf Resort, Puerto Rico

### Controls Algae With Ultrasonic Waves!

- **Green Solution** - No chemicals
- Low maintenance - Simple to use
- Environmentally safe
- Safe for fish, plants, or other aquatic life
- Solar available!
- Ask us about our 3-Month Rental Demo!

**SonicSolutions<sup>®</sup> LLC**  
Algae Control Without Chemicals!

**1-866-KO-ALGAE**  
(1-866-562-5423)  
**sonicsolutionsllc.com**



**Mike Davis (left), the USGA's senior director of rules and competitions, confers with Jim Hyler at Pebble Beach.**

*Continued from page 49*

conditions, but that was not the goal.”

Such a statement by Hyler or Gross on television might have helped. But with all due respect to the men in navy blue, most viewers leave the room when NBC gives us those contractually obligated chats. The words need to come from a variety of sources, starting with better informed announcers and supplemented with clever ad campaigns like the relentlessly overplayed spot featuring a young man who makes a hole-in-one that is only witnessed by the oldest living and latest working course maintenance worker in America. Considering the ad was filmed years ago and the young man is in college, maybe it's time to freshen up the branding.

And what better excuse to move in some fun, short and very sweet messages that help the public understand what “green” golf means. More urgently, these ads need to be about costs. Just the kind of thing the old money types at the USGA dread, since after all, they are in the business of governing the game, not the bottom line.

Yet, the majority of golfers will only listen if they can find something relatable in a message about brown golf.

Superintendents all over the country who have crunched numbers on native area conversions or presented cost/benefit analyses of reduced water usage can tell you there's nothing like showing people a bottom-line savings.

In other words, the USGA and its Green Section needs to ramp up its investment in grants to researchers developing new grasses or give cash away to show who can show a correlation between sustainable practices and cost reduction. Unfortunately, Hyler takes over a USGA with a lot less money to play with and a gutted grants program.

But one budget that hasn't been slashed is the marketing dough. And right now the fight to save the game and provide a foundation for its future in America means convincing golfers there will be long-term financial benefits to sustainable practices passed along to them. Because it's all about them, as the last few months likely have proved to Hyler and the USGA folks who are pursuing a noble cause. ■

*Geoff Shackelford is a long-time contributing editor to Golfdom and author of the magazine's back-page column, Shack Attack.*