

HOW TOPDRESSING BECAME AN



Superintendents used to use wheelbarrows and shovels. How times have changed

By Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief



The Toro Co. purchased TV-CROP Manufacturing last year and now has a line of topdressers for golf.

TOPDRESSING HAS TRANSFORMED into an art in golf course maintenance circles. And one could say topdressers have assumed the distinctive role of artists in the process.

The machines have received major upgrades and enhancements over the years to help superintendents turn golf courses into the masterpieces they desire.

"Golfers' expectations for excellent conditions and superintendents' desires to give them those conditions have changed the process of topdressing dramatically," says Scott Kinkead, executive vice president of Turfco Manufacturing in Minneapolis.

Tony L. Ferguson, senior business development manager for Bloomington, Minn.-based The Toro Co., says golfers want those excellent conditions — smoother surfaces, cleaner playing conditions, and better and truer rolls — to appear almost magically before their eyes.

"The catch is golfers want this without any disruptions, and without seeing any maintenance people or turf maintenance being performed," Ferguson adds. "This



Superintendents are topdressing more frequently with lighter applications.

has led to topdressers that can perform the required task very quickly, and leave a result — evenness of spread — that requires little or no further work. That is — no dragging, no hand brushing, no uneven applications and no undue damage to the turf surface. The goal is to topdress, so golfers don't know you've done anything."

Randy Dufault, president of Grand Forks, N.D.-based Dakota Peat & Equipment, echoes Ferguson's thoughts, and says new topdressers must do much more than old topdressers, which just needed to put down sand.

"And it really didn't matter how well the old topdressers put down sand because [course workers] would brush it in and, in most cases, close the course down for the day to get it all done and cleaned up," Dufault adds.

As time passed, however, golfers' expectations for perfection grew, and light and frequent topdressing now plays a major role in golf course maintenance, Dufault says.

Bruce Carmichael, national sales manager for Warren, Mich.-based TurfEx, says traditional methods of core aeration and heavy topdressing applications typically required a course to be shut down for a period of time.

"But with the development of verticutting, superintendents can now follow up with lighter, more frequent topdressing applications that allow for virtually instant playability," he adds.

Kinthead says the drive for firmer and faster greens has led to more frequent topdressing every seven to 14 days to sustain greenspeed and control thatch.

Ferguson says today's topdressers can complete 18 greens and a practice green in a little more than an hour. "This is achieved by utilizing a smaller topdresser for the topdressing application and the material handler as a supply source for the topdressing material," he says. "This avoids multiple trips back to the sand pile, which decreases productivity."

Today, as high-end golf courses improve their topdressing practices, the next tier of golf courses must strive to equal the same conditions to compete with those courses, Ferguson says.

Distinct changes

Back in the days of Old Tom Morris, circa 1890, "greenkeepers" used wheelbarrows and shovels for topdressing, Kinthead says. It wasn't until the early 1960s that Turfco manufactured the first mechanized topdresser with

a wooden hopper and wooden slots, he adds. Topdressers have undergone major changes since.

Dufault says today's topdressers are easy to use and adjust because they have to be. Topdressers are being used more often, so superintendents want reliable machines more than ever. Also, because maintenance crews are leaner from a labor standpoint, topdressers need to perform more functions.

Carmichael says TurfEx machines are equipped with an easy-to-use intuitive controller that allows the auger, spinner and gate to be independently adjusted from the towing vehicle.

"A digital readout shows the operator exactly how much material is being spread," he says. "The automatic startup and shutdown feature of the controller also eases operation by powering up the spinners before the feed system starts, and then shutting the spinners off a few seconds after the material flow stops."

The denser turfgrass varieties have caused manufacturers to change machinery so topdressing material can be integrated into the canopies more easily, Kinthead says. If material sits on top of turf, it can wear out mower reels faster and slow greenspeed.

"Superintendents need to topdress such varieties more frequently with lighter applications to keep pace with organic accumulation," Kinthead says.

Manufacturers have also concentrated on making topdressers easier to operate, Kinthead says. Much of this has been directed at application rates. "We focused on making the spinner design as simple as possible so you don't have to worry about making adjustments to go from a light to a medium spread to a narrower or wider spread," Kinthead says.

Ferguson says superintendents desire equipment settings that are easy to establish and repeat. Some current and previous models of topdressers required that the operator set up the unit, make a first pass, check the result

Continued on page 40



Tony L. Ferguson

Topdressing

Continued from page 39

and then make needed adjustments to get the desired result.

"Topdressers available today have advanced technology that allow for easy to establish adjustments, so the operator can achieve the right application the first time," Ferguson says.

Controllers are easier and better than ever in controlling belt and spinner speed, Ferguson adds. Wireless controllers can operate units from up to 150 yards away, allowing for a second person to watch the performance and make adjustments in real-time. These controllers can also store desired settings from one application to the next for repeatable, consistent topdressing results.

What to look for?

If a superintendent is shopping for a new topdresser, what does he or she need to look for? First, that superintendent must know exactly how he or she plans to use the topdresser, Kinkead points out. "Is the person using it just for greens? Or is the person using it for greens, tees and approaches?" Kinkead asks.

Green size plays a role in topdresser selection.

"If you have small greens, you probably need a truck mount," Kinkead adds. "A tow-behind is the best way to go for bigger greens."

And if that superintendent plans to use the topdresser for fairways, he or she must purchase a larger machine that will also double as a material handler.

Topdressing frequency is also an issue. If the superintendent only topdresses four or five times a year, he or she probably doesn't need a spinner topdresser, Kinkead says. A less-expensive ground-drive drop spreader would do just fine.

"You don't have to spend the extra dollars if you're only going to topdress a

handful of times a year," Kinkead says.

A topdresser's durability should also be considered, Kinkead adds. Considering it's a six- to 10-year purchase, a superintendent doesn't want to buy a piece of junk. Also, the superintendent should consider the machine's warranty and resale value.

And a superintendent shouldn't buy a topdresser without demonstrating it and all of its applications, Kinkead says. That means conducting light and heavy applications.

The superintendent should also look for a topdresser with a hopper that's long enough for the loader bucket, Dufault says. Also, the topdresser should have a big enough gas tank to cover 18 holes on one route. Dufault says selecting the right hitch weight is vital on pull-type units. "Without the proper hitch weight, the pull vehicle spins the tires going up onto the greens and tears up the grass," he says.

A superintendent should also keep maintenance in mind when selecting a topdresser. To address maintenance issues, TurfEx built a topdresser with a corrosion-resistant polyethylene hopper, which doesn't need the frequent washings

or paint touch-ups that a steel-built unit does, Carmichael says. The company's all-electric design has also eliminated many of the moving parts and other maintenance requirements associated with hydraulically powered machines, he adds.

If a superintendent is going to use the topdresser on greens, he should select

a model with a lightweight design, Carmichael says. "Look for hoppers made of lightweight materials, such as polyethylene, in order to keep that pressure rating to a minimum," he adds.

Ferguson says the service and support of the topdresser distributor and manufacturer should also be high on the list of important things to consider.

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"Support from your distributor and manufacturer will allow the superintendent to fine tune a course's topdressing program as the needs, goals and expectations of the golfers change," he says.

Ferguson also says superintendents shouldn't change their topdressing programs to match a topdresser's abilities. Superintendents also should consider a topdresser's ease of setup and operation.

"A customer should buy the topdresser that provides the best performance and results: perfect application rate and spread pattern; easy operation; simple to maintain; and lightest footprint," he says. ■



Scott Kinkead



Ad Index

Advertiser	Page No.
Andersons The	CV4
BASF	15, 33, 41
Bayer ES	25
Becker Underwood	2
FMC	CV3
Greenleaf Tech Inc	32
Jacobsen	13
Kochek	32
Nufarm	30-31
PBI/Gordon	9, 26-27
Quali-Pro	5
Rain Bird	3
Redexim Charterhouse	19
Reliable	36
SolarBee	22
Syngenta	21
Toro Co	CV2
Turfco Mfg Inc	24, 37
Valent USA Corp	23, 35
White Metal Golf	37

TURFGRASS TRENDS

John Deere	42
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