

ANALYSIS

# The Best of



**B**ROWN IS THE NEW GREEN — at least according to the United States Golf Association and its president, Jim Hyler. By now, I'm sure you've heard this catchy little motto being spread throughout the golf course maintenance industry. Since becoming the USGA's president earlier this year, Hyler has been on a gallant quest of widespread acceptance with his firm-and-fast conditioning concept through reduced water usage.

Now if your members and golfers are anything like mine, this off-color message is being met with a less-than-enthusiastic embrace. One of my most favorite members summed up his stance on the issue rather simply with this remark: "Brown is the new green? Son, that dog just don't hunt!"

This interesting reaction shouldn't come as a big surprise considering the unfortunate timing of events at this year's U.S. Open at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

# Both Worlds

YOU CAN BE GREEN, AS IN ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE, AND STILL HAVE A STATELY LOOKING GOLF COURSE **BY CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR., CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

During a USGA press conference before play began, Hyler openly promoted his mission of brown being the new green and praised Pebble Beach for its environmental sustainability programs. Then Mother Nature took control and dried out Pebble's greens to the point that they resembled a third grader's mosaic art project.

Then to add insult to injury, the world's No. 1 player, Tiger Woods, openly criticized the playability of the greens by calling them "awful." Justified or not — when Tiger talks, people listen.

This disastrous chain of events has unfortunately created an overly negative perception of virtually everything the USGA and Hyler were pushing to create. It's as simple as guilt by association. This perception now harms the positive, underlying environmental message trying to be relayed to the general public, which is truly regrettable.

But there's a larger issue here that really needs to be addressed and clarified.

While I wholeheartedly applaud this noble and critical endeavor by the USGA on reducing the amount of water we use in our industry, I have to question the need for bringing "brown" into the equation at all. Specifically, I strongly disagree with the implication that you can't be environmentally responsible and retain your green color at the same time.

Let's consider the economic reality in which we work. The golf industry is, at its heart, a customer service business with a profitability model that demands giving the customers what they want. Survey after survey of golfers has clearly indicated that course conditioning tops the list of their expectations. And, like it or not, a big part of course conditioning includes the color green in the minds of our golfers.

So it's our professional pursuit, as superintendents, to be

both environmentally responsible and maintain the green color of our golf courses, something we certainly can accomplish. It's simply a matter of maintaining a healthy turfgrass plant through common-sense practices, which many of us have pushed the envelope on over the years.

## **A return to common sense**

I advocate the widespread application of common sense as the most useful tool to realize both environmental eco-consciousness and provide a beautiful, healthy green playing surface for our golfers.

Almost without exception, most issues hindering our ability to achieve both "green" goals have been self-induced by people within the golf industry, not the actual golfers. As superintendents, some of these problems we produced ourselves, while others have been passed down to us. Either way, a simple trip back to Agronomy 101 and Practical Golf Course Management 102 classes will help guide us back to where we need to be.

Here's a look at some of the problems and possible solutions that will allow us to maintain our environmental stewardship efforts while maintaining our green color — and use less water in the process.

## **Appropriate turf varieties**

Can someone tell me when we became smarter than Mother Nature? I only ask because I distinctly remember learning the difference between cool-season grasses and warm-season grasses, and in what geographic climates they perform best. Apparently, some "decision makers" came to the brilliant conclusion over the years that cool-season grasses can be properly maintained in warm-season climates and vice-versa.

*Continued on page 28*



*Continued from page 27*

For years, creeping bentgrass has crept farther and farther south into hot and humid climates clearly not suitable for its intrinsic nature. However, in an effort to capitalize on the smooth putting surface that creeping bentgrass provides, course after course south of the Mason-Dixon line has installed creeping bentgrass greens, convinced they can maintain the cool-season grass in a sizzling climate.

Yes, creeping bentgrass can survive in Southern climates, but the amount of nurturing required to keep it healthy is unbelievably enormous. In terms of chemical applications alone, creeping bentgrass requires copious amounts of fungicide protection — not to mention the frequent irrigation necessary to fight back the fierce Southern heat. Even with the proper resources to manage creeping bentgrass in a warm-season climate, staying on top of the greens is a daunting task.

After a blistering, hot summer like we just experienced, go ahead and ask any superintendent managing creeping bentgrass in the Southern half of the country how his or her greens held up. Then ask those superintendents how much sleep they lost.

In the end, this solution of this basic problem is to utilize the proper species of turf in the appropriate climate. In the case of creeping bentgrass in the South, replacing it with one of the new ultra-dwarf bermudagrass varieties makes a lot of sense. Obviously, that's much easier to say than to actually implement. But the economic liabilities that creeping bentgrass pose to the maintenance budget ultimately makes it a losing proposition for environmental responsibility while providing healthy, playable turf.

Choosing the appropriate species of turf, along with the right variety, is a fundamental solution for proper course management. Trying to challenge this fundamentally correct philosophy makes absolutely no sense. In retrospect, I think it was day three of Agronomy 101 that covered this basic concept.

## **Irrigation efficiency**

The lifeblood of any golf course is its irrigation system. The methods we employ to irrigate have an enormous impact on our ability to provide a green golf course. These same irrigation practices also play a colossal part of being environmentally responsible. In short, our ability to irrigate efficiently is critical in pursuing our environ-

mental successes while producing a healthy, green turf plant.

Irrigating efficiently, by common-sense definition, means making water applications without being wasteful — irrigating only where necessary and only when necessary. But when applying this common-sense philosophy to the golf industry, you quickly realize it means vastly different things to each superintendent. And that's just fine.

Whether applying wetting agents to help retain moisture in the soil profile, changing out your standard plastic nozzles with high-efficiency stainless-steel nozzles or doing a complete irrigation system audit from water supply to water hitting the turf, the importance of being as efficient as possible, as soon as possible, can't be understated.

With water restrictions and regulations very likely heading our way, common sense dictates that being prepared now will help curtail this problematic issue once it does come to fruition.

## **Rolling, rolling, rolling**

Maintaining a healthy turf plant is the best way to keep it green, which means limiting the amount of stress it has to endure. When it comes to our putting greens, however, plant stress comes with the territory. Keeping our greens quick and smooth is necessary to meet golfers' expectations. Again, we are a service industry. But rather than dropping the height of cut and increasing the plant's stress to accommodate these demands, you can achieve the same effect by utilizing a greens roller.

Before widespread production of rollers, it was common



Cultural practices, such as aerification, are vital to keeping turfgrass healthy and green.

practice to drop the height of cut in order to speed up the greens at the onslaught of golfer demands. The real problem involved the timing of it all. Golfers started ramping up their speed demands at pretty much the same time the climatic conditions told you not to start taking off leaf tissue. This all-too-familiar scenario set up the woe-fully uncomfortable balancing act between oversteering greens and keeping the golfers somewhat happy.

Luckily, we have some common-sense salvation to cling to with employing an alternate-day rotation schedule between mowing and rolling. Because you're not mowing your greens so frequently and allowing the turf plants to retain their much-needed leaf tissue, the greens are easier to keep healthier and greener. Frequently rolling greens achieves both the increased green speed and smoothness the golfers demand, but with much less stress than mowing. In the end, it's a win-win situation.

### Spray-on green

Depending on the fertilizer type that tops your favorite list, knowing just how much nitrogen to apply to generate that ideal green color within the plant can be a very fine line. So much, in fact, that often times we over-apply the amount of actual nitrogen just to ensure we hit our goal. Unfortunately, this practice, while certainly making the turf green, also adds a surplus of nutrients to the soil that will ultimately end up being flushed through the profile without any benefit to the turf.

Common sense dictates cutting back on these fertilizer applications that are more about color and less about actual turf nutrition. With timely soil analysis reports, we can feed the soil the accurate amounts of nutrients to achieve proper plant nourishment levels, even at the expense of a little nitrogen.

To counteract this loss of nitrogen for color, applications of chelated iron will provide you with the color that golfers anticipate. Because chelated iron provides iron in a form immediately available to the plant, it quickly provides a dark, green color to the turf. Depending on the foliar rate applied, this color lasts about two to three weeks.

I love chelated iron because it's economical and environmentally safe, with an application remaining in the soil for extended feeding for the turf. While mainly used on putting greens, chelated iron should also be considered for application to both fairways and tees.



“To add insult to injury, **TIGER WOODS CALLED PEBBLE'S GREENS 'AWFUL.'** Justified or not, when Tiger talks, people listen.”



### The value of cultural practices

Without question, the importance of cultural practices can't be overemphasized when it comes to plant health and staying green. It doesn't matter whether you're aerifying, verticutting, slicing, spiking or topdressing — all of these practices are vital to maintaining a healthy, green playing surface under normal circumstances. These same procedures become even more imperative when you're implementing environmental stewardship programs that directly affect the amount of water, nutrition and protective chemical applications.

I've visited several golf facilities that have significantly reduced the amount of cultural practices because of their labor budget being reduced, leaving them with less manpower than in previous years. This is unfortunate. Common sense suggests the financial savings that can be realized from well-thought-out environmental programs will easily cover the costs of performing these basic agronomic practices.

There's a symbiotic relationship between cultural and environmental programs. The cultural practices provide increased oxygen and water infiltration to the root zone of the turf, making it easier for the plant to maintain its green color.

Meanwhile, properly developed and executed environmental programs provide ample financial savings through reduced inputs necessary to manage the turf appropriately. That's what I call common sense.

The iconic leader of the Muppets, Kermit the Frog, sings, "It ain't easy being green." No, it's not. That's why we need to use common-sense to ensure we, as superintendents, meet all of the demands of our position: playable, visual and environmental.

You definitely can be environmentally "green" and provide a green color for your course. So, for me, brown is not the new green. It can't be. It's like saying Fozzie Bear is the new Kermit the Frog. And that's something people simply aren't ready to accept, nor should they have to. ■

---

*Gray is superintendent and general manager of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky. Gray has won several awards for his environmental prowess on the golf course. He's also an award-winning contributing editor and columnist for Golfdom.*