

GREEN DAY

According to David Swift, head superintendent at Minnehaha Country Club in Harrisburg, S.D., the difficulty of maintaining a putting green can be as hard as you want it to be. Maybe it's all in the way you read the breaks and the undulations and how you handle the speed.

"It's certainly not hard," says Swift, who previously was the head superintendent of the Straits Course at Whistling Straits. "We put pressure on ourselves. Mother Nature can make it hard, members' demands can make it hard and we can make it hard. But it's grass and it needs a little bit of water, it needs a little bit of sun. It needs a little bit of fertility and in today's world it needs a little bit of fungicides from time to time."

Greens can be both easy and hard, complicated and simple. But one thing is for sure: They're still the most important part of a golf course. **BY BOB SELIGMAN**

It can need plenty of patience, lots of communication, creativeness and having the best equipment to keep the putting surface in pristine shape. How you handle it and learn from it — and keep the golfers happy — can determine whether you've aced the job or 3-putted.

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No. 3 at Cobbs Creek Golf Course has been rebuilt and rebuilt again, thanks to the course's namesake.

PHOTO COURTESY: BILLY CASPER GOLF



The famous floating green at Coeur d'Alene Golf Resort presents unique challenges for superintendent Kevin Hicks.



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Take the situation at the No. 3 green at Cobbs Creek Golf Club, a public course in Philadelphia, where flooding was such a problem that Darren Wondolowski, the head superintendent, might have wanted to call in an “Ark-itect,” as in Noah, instead of a golf course designer.

When Wondolowski came to Cobbs Creek in 2009, flooding had been an ongoing problem at the third green, the culmination of the course’s signature hole, as well as on other parts of the layout. Cobbs Creek was built in 1916 and designed by Hugh Wilson, who also designed Merion, which is just up the road. As

can happen with a hole that’s by an active creek, water can take center stage.

“The primary feature of the golf course is obviously Cobbs Creek, which runs through the middle of the golf course,” says Wondolowski. “We have five holes that run right along the creek bed. Cobbs Creek, under heavy rain events, floods. I don’t know the volume of water that runs through it but it’s significant.”

When Billy Casper Golf assumed management of Cobbs Creek in 2009, it rebuilt the No. 3 green from scratch and had it ready to play in April. “It was our crowning achievement for our first year of management of the property,” says Wondolowski.

The crown quickly lost its luster on the first Sunday of August when severe rains flooded and completely demolished the green, damaging a 1,200- to 1,500-sq.-ft section of the 4,000-sq.-ft. area. But Wondolowski and his staff put their noses to the root zone and had the green in playing condition in 14 days.

But on the 15th day, Mother Nature played another cruel joke when three more inches of rain completely destroyed the green for the second time in two weeks. As Wondolowski says, it was tough to watch. Once again, the green was repaired in 14 days with the help of some guidelines from the Army Corps of Engineers.

"We used the Army Corps of Engineers specifications and built an underground sandbag levee (with more than 5,000 hand-filled sand bags) to try and protect the back of the green," says Wondolowski. "So far it's been effective. We've had several rain events and the water is being currently diverted by the levee."

Wondolowski says the experience has given him an amazing respect for the power of water. If floods damage the green again, it'll be déjà vu.

"I'll do the same thing as I did before. Rebuild and try again," says Wondolowski. "I'll just get to work. That's what we do. Part of the job is dealing with what nature deals you. You're never bored as a golf course superintendent, that's for sure."

From umbilical cords to ears

While rebuilding the No. 3 green at Cobbs Creek took a lot of labor, maintaining the famous 14th hole floating island green at Coeur d'Alene Golf & Spa Resort in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is also labor intensive because everything has to be transported there by boat.

"We have our own small barge that we use for transporting mowers and top dressers and things like that," says Kevin Hicks, golf course superintendent at the resort. "It's a dedicated work boat. It doubles as our driving range picker. That's another unique facet we don't see at too many golf courses. You're hitting floating balls."

But when you have a solitary 15,000-sq.-ft. island pontooned in a nearly 50-square-mile lake, environmental concerns must be handled just as uniquely — if not more so — as getting the equipment there in the first place. Anything that's applied to the green like water, fertilizers and pesticides has to be contained within the green and can't go back into Lake Coeur d'Alene.

"That's a very strict stipulation within the EPA and our state permitting that it has to be contained and shipped back to shore. That's accomplished through a pretty incredible system that we call 'the Umbilical Cord,'" says Hicks. "It's got a line that's four inches in diameter and more than 300 yards long that has to be flexible because the green moves. It goes from the green via a pumping system back to the shore through a dry well where we can monitor what's coming through."

A liner underneath the green directs all the drainage into a central drainage sump — a containment tank — in the front bunker. Drainage flows from the back to front, which is the way the green is shaped. Once the tank is full, its contents are pumped via the umbilical cord back to shore and transported off-site. The entire green is a USGA-constructed root zone that is completely contained within the liner system.

While some greens might require an umbilical cord to get things right, others only need a sentimental ear to solve problems. At Minnehaha CC, for example, members have different desires about the conditions they want in their greens. Some view them as too soft, others too firm. Some may feel the speed is tortoise-like, while others see it as "hare-raising."

In his role as head superintendent, Swift knows listening and communication can be the means to solving the problems of the greens.

"We have over 300 members and for half of them the greens are too slow and for half the greens are too fast. Half of them are too firm and half of them are too soft," says Swift, who has listened to the likes of Pete Dye at Whistling Straits. "Superintendents want to please everybody but you're never going to please all the people all the time so we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. Golfer's perceptions put a lot of pressure on us."

"We try to keep the greens relatively fast; not ridiculously fast but relatively fast," adds Swift. "When it's hot and humid and raining more than it should be, there's times of the year when it's difficult to maintain the greens speeds that the members expect on a day-to-day basis. We're getting better every year with the technology and research that's going on. We can do a lot more than we used to be able to. It's becoming easier in many ways but golfer's expectations are becoming higher."

Swift attains feedback by playing golf with the members, having lunch with them or just interacting with them. He calls communication the No. 1 tool in his arsenal in maintaining greens.

"When we run the risk of compromised putting green quality, particularly due to heat, humidity or extreme moisture and we can't deliver what they want, I'm not afraid to stand

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on the first tee on men's day or during the club championship and tell the membership that today the greens are not quite where we want them to be and this is why," says Swift. "Here's the situation and here's how we dealt with it and here's how the impact is going to be during your round of golf today. Nine times out of 10, as long as the membership and the other players have an understanding before they tee off, the main issue becomes a non-issue because we communicated that beforehand."

The right tools

Having the right equipment can also keep members — and superintendents — happy. On the greens it's the perfection that differentiates you, says Helmut Ullrich, senior marketing manager at The Toro Co. As with Swift's handling of the members at Minnehaha, you have to listen to your customers.

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— Darren Wondolowski, Cobbs Creek Golf Club

"It's a real challenge for a manufacturer to make one piece of equipment or several pieces that will fit every golf course in the world," says Ullrich. "You have to constantly listen to the customers and understand the challenges they have and find solutions for them. In the last decade many courses have changed cultivars to ultra dwarf varieties, like A or G series in the North and Champion or Paspalum in the South. They tolerate a lot lower cutting heights to meet the golfer's demands for faster green speed over the last decade, or even longer. They require that they be a lot lower because the golfer demands a

faster golf speed over the last decade, or even longer. That requires new equipment and approaching things differently. Our equipment today cuts a lot lower and a lot more perfect than it ever has.

"The lower you cut, the more susceptible greens become for diseases. The root system of the grass is proportional to what's above the ground. The shallower the root system is the more susceptible the greens are," adds Ullrich. "We're really concerned about turf health. How can we help in that direction? One way is to do less damage to the turf. You do less scuffing, you do less gouging, you do less tire damage. If you can avoid those things it goes a long way in helping superintendents to have healthy greens and a great putting surface."

Ullrich says Toro's equipment avoids turf problems and keeps greens healthy in a variety of ways. Superior floatability in the cutting enables the mowers to be gentler on greens and handle undulations easier. Toro is also following the trend toward being environmentally friendly by embracing alternative fuels and pioneering Lithium Ion battery technology as an industry first.

"We believe you have to have slight contact between the reel and the bedknife to efficiently, cleanly cut the turf, which contributes to turf health," says Ullrich. "If you do not have contact between the two cutting devices then you just beat the grass up and it's more susceptible to diseases."

Toro's new Greenmaster Triflex riders come in four different configurations: gas and diesel powered, full hydraulic and hybrid drive systems. A special tire configuration lessens imprints on greens and avoids damage.

Features like tires that are capable of lessening imprints on greens are ironically making a bigger imprint on the minds of superintendents. Tools like these are a reminder that they are not alone in the quest for better putting surfaces. With the help of the right tools, maintaining greens can be easier. Sure, some greens might need umbilical cords while others keep flooding, but today's superintendent has more tools than ever for the end goal of making golfers happier.

On greens, the grass has never been greener. ■

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