

With winter's arrival, whether or not to allow golfers to play on the course is always a difficult decision. For many facilities, the decision to close

for the winter isn't an option. Ensuring that increased clubhouse activity caused by winter play generates revenue is becoming more and more critical to the survival of golf clubs.

The agronomic loss to the golf course, therefore, must be included in the revenue equation. When the course is dry and has no snow cover, even if it's cold, golfers want to play and take a golf cart or pull cart. From a turf perspective, all top growth has ceased, and the plant is in a dormant or semidormant stage.

The winter hardening process is similar to how a plant hardens itself off during a summer drought. To harden off, the crown desiccates, and the percentage of moisture in the crown begins to decline along with the plant, sacrificing tissue growth.

Once winter play begins, wear injury from foot and golf cart traffic can happen. The following are situations and practices you might encounter and what you can do in response:

■ **Mowing.** One common practice on warm-season turfgrass most likely to go into winter dormancy is to mow higher in the fall, allowing for more leaf tissue to protect the crown region from wear. If a green needs to be smoothed during winter, it's better to roll than to mow.

■ **Traffic dispersion.** Monitor where wear areas occur from foot or cart traffic. If wear is concentrated, the areas become more prone to compaction and *Poa annua* establishment. If wear areas occur, note them. Because they'll likely be injured during times of summer stress, especially drought stress. Disperse traffic patterns as if you were managing the turf for drought stress.

■ **Compaction.** Concentrated traffic will increase the potential of soil compaction, especially if the soils tend to remain wet. Later in

Watch for Wear Injury

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the year, compacted conditions will contribute to summer stress by restricting root growth, decreasing soil oxygen levels, increasing respiration rates and decreasing photosynthetic rates. Spring coring should be done to relieve surface soil compaction.

■ ***Poa annua*.** Given that *Poa annua* is a winter annual, germination occurs primarily in the fall. Although the emergence of *Poa annua* in fall and early winter is not always noticeable, it seems to appear out of nowhere in early spring. That's because it takes time to germinate and emerge through the turf canopy. Where wear or openings in the canopy appear, *Poa* might colonize quickly.

Golf courses that see considerable winter play provide golfers with a small artificial mat on which to hit their fairway shots. The mat provides a consistent uniform lie and protects the turf from divots and later, *Poa*.

■ **Golfers.** I believe that most golfers who are willing to play during the winter value their golf courses. So let them know how they can reduce damage to the course when they play during the off-season. Remind them that golf courses that stay open for winter play aren't going to be in as good condition in spring as courses that closed down for the winter.

Because traffic stress and wear injury are major problems on dormant turf, managing a course for winter play can be as challenging as opening or closing a course in the growing season.

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