

NO. 1 PRIORITY

Do more with less.

This has become a worn-out, maybe-not-entirely-accurate phrase almost all golf course superintendents have heard and used continuously for the past several years during the sluggish economy.

Superintendents with smaller budgets — \$500,000 or less — might not be doing more. Instead, they're prioritizing their maintenance. And, of course, the No. 1 priority is greens. As such, other areas of their courses don't get the kind of

Superintendents with smaller budgets focus on greens, the single most important aspect of a course.

BY JOHN WALSH

attention superintendents would like to give them.

Johnathan Doyle and Randy Swonger are two superintendents who have less but are making the most of what they have. And like any superintendent, they say it's all about the greens.

"With a limited budget, you have

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The practice facility at Trout Lake GC is known as the No. 1 facility in the area, and includes a 7,000-square-foot putting green.

Putting Greens Special

The most superintendent Randy Swonger has ever had in his maintenance budget was \$318,000.



"My stress is money, which controls me 100 percent of the time."

— TROUT LAKE GOLF CLUB SUPERINTENDENT RANDY SWONGER

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to prioritize the maintenance of the property," says Swonger, golf course superintendent at Trout Lake Golf Club, a public, 18-hole course in Arbor Vitae, Wis. "Let's be honest, the greens are the bread and butter on any golf course. If they aren't good your play could really suffer and affect the bottom line. We believe in cultural programs that include topdressing, aerifying and verticutting. It's cultural, cultural, cultural."

Swonger maintains the 88-year-old course with a \$305,000 budget, which has stayed consistent throughout the years. The most Swonger's had to work with during the eight years he's been at Trout Lake is \$318,000.

Trout Lake is a tourist destination surrounded by summer homes. During the shoulder seasons — spring and fall — golfers are local. But during the summer, half of them come from Chicago and other parts of Illinois.

Doyle maintains the course at Greenbrier Golf and Country Club — a 6,754-yard, championship course in Lexington, Ky. — with an operating budget of about \$500,000. He says since city courses' budgets in the region start at about \$350,000, his budget falls in the middle of the local market.

The Greenbrier has 300 full golf memberships available and has hosted three Kentucky State Open championships since 1981. It's also the site of the annual Children's Charity Classic, a celebrity-amateur golf fundraiser.

Take care of the turf

The Greenbrier's bentgrass/*Poa annua* greens comprise four acres. They're old push-up greens that were seeded with bentgrass but now have quite a bit of *Poa* in them. Doyle, who spends about half of his budget on greens, mows them with a triplex mower five to six days a week and rolls them two to three times a week.

Lexington's hot and humid summers have made maintaining the greens a challenge, so Doyle cut labor in the spring and fall and added it for syringing in the summer.

"We do well until late July," he says about the condition of the greens, though he admits there's sometimes been turf loss in August. "With older greens, I seem to spend more money than those who maintain USGA-spec greens. Our soil temperatures are seven or eight degrees higher than USGA greens across town."

Swonger aerifies his *Poa* greens in the spring. That's unlike most superintendents, who aerify in the fall.

Swonger, who topdresses greens

every two weeks, verticuts them every spring and fall. And every three weeks, he spikes the greens to prevent crusting on the turf's surface and facilitate better water penetration. He recently purchased brooms for his greens mowers and has been grooming the turf daily.

Inputs

Operating with a chemical budget of \$125,000, including fertilizer (\$90,000 without fertilizer), Doyle applies foliar fertilizer every Monday and a foliar soil amendment every other Monday. Additionally, he applies a granular fertilizer twice in the spring and twice in the fall. With pesticides, Doyle applies fungicides every 14 days and every seven to 10 days during the summer, when disease pressure is greater.

"It's a budget killer," he says. "So, I try to stick to 14 days as much as I can."

At Trout Lake, Swonger operates within a chemical budget of \$53,400, including fertilizer (\$36,900 without it). Like Doyle, Swonger's fertility program for greens includes foliar products, which he applies June through Labor Day. In the spring and fall, he applies granular products.

Swonger's fungicide application frequency on greens is the basic two weeks, starting the first week of June through the fall, when he makes his first snow mold application. Past Labor Day, applications are farther apart — three weeks or 24 days.

"I'm keeping them clean," he says.

Because Trout Lake is located in the snow belt off Lake Superior, getting the course ready for winter isn't easy.

"We've gone to green jackets to cover all greens because we need to stay on top of snow mold," Swonger says. "Green covers were a huge investment, but they paid for themselves."

Irrigation troubles

Despite managing a cool-season grass in hot, humid weather in the transition zone, Doyle's biggest challenge is irrigation. Greenbrier's system has main lines older than 40 years, so it leaks frequently and provides poor coverage. Consequently, Doyle and his crew have made as many as 33 irrigation repairs in a week and 200 in a year. They also have to water green banks with hoses.

"We don't have the labor to drag hoses whenever we need to," Doyle says, adding that he spends between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a year maintaining the irrigation system. "The past two summers have been difficult because of the hot, humid weather," he says. "In spring and fall, when we don't need to water as much, we're a two-man crew and me on weekends until we need to water more. I save overtime costs for the summer."

And the three main diseases Doyle battles — pythium root dysfunction, anthracnose and summer patch — are directly related to poor drainage.

"The ultimate solution is to rebuild the greens, but we're not going to do that in the near future," says Doyle, who's worked at Greenbrier for eight years. "We need a new ir-

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Greenbrier G&CC has hosted three Kentucky State Open Championships, and since 1981 has been the annual host of the Children's Charity Classic.





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— GREENBRIER GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB SUPERINTENDENT JOHNATHAN DOYLE

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rigation system before anything. It sucks up half of our labor in the summer.”

Beyond the greens

Because greens are a priority at Greenbrier, there are times when Doyle goes two weeks without weed eating. Additionally, he slows the growth of the fairways and tees with plant growth regulators and has established more native areas in the rough to reduce maintenance.

“I now cut tees twice a week instead of three or four times a week and cut fairways three to four times a week instead of every day,” he says. “The ratio of labor to PGRs is two to one.”

Like Doyle, Swonger has had to make cuts.

“We don’t rake our bunkers every day, and we’ve had to reduce cutting tees to twice a week,” he says. “But with the use of PGRs on all playing surfaces, we’ve been able to reduce labor and still provide good daily conditions.”

Golfdom’s readers overwhelmingly agree that when money gets tight, the greens get the green. When asked the theoretical question “how much of the final \$1,000 in the maintenance budget goes to keeping greens alive?” 86 percent responded “All of it.” (See page S10 for the complete results of our putting greens survey.)

Budget crunch

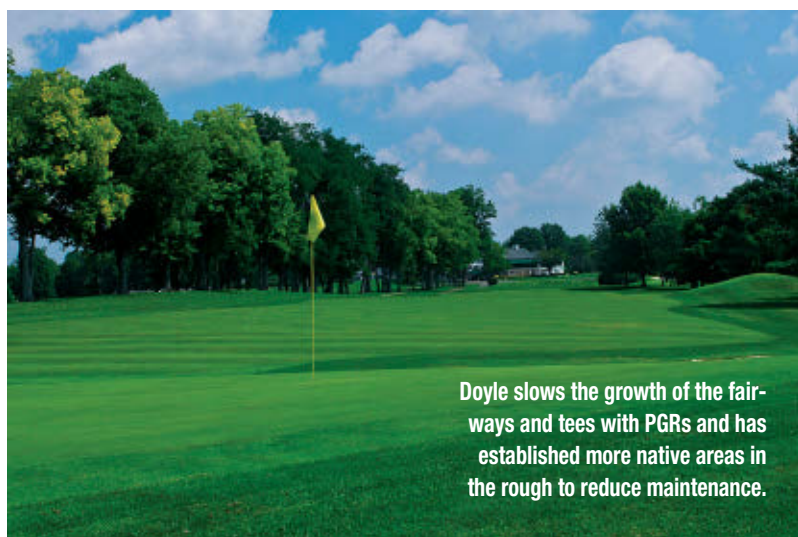
The bottom line for Doyle is, spend more on maintaining the course and less on repairing it. Greenbrier members always have worthwhile ideas for improvements, but their ideas can’t be implemented because the money just isn’t available right now.

“Our financially responsible owners are trying to ensure we’re here for a long time,” he says.

Swonger, who used to work at private golf clubs, says working at a public course such as Trout Lake has been eye-opening.

“My stress is money, which controls me 100 percent of the time,” he says. “However, the club’s owners live within their means, which is why we haven’t hurt ourselves during the past five years.” ■

Walsh is a contributing editor for Golfdom.



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