

WHAT'S **OLD** IS **NEW** AGAIN

MODERN TECHNOLOGY has done wonders for the care of golf courses. But no matter how advanced the tools become, Mother Nature finds a way to complicate things. Instead of finding a new solution, maybe it's better to return to an old method.

That's exactly what Chris Deariso did when he was faced with an aggressive thatch problem that was threatening the health of the greens at McArthur Golf Club in Hobe Sound, Fla. Deariso, the former superintendent at McArthur (he recently became the superintendent at Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, N.C.), had a growing thatch problem on the course's TifEagle ultradwarf bermudagrass greens.

"That's a problem with those ultradwarfs," says Wayne Branthwaite, vice president of Nick Price Golf Course Design (Nick Price is a partner at McArthur). "They're inherently aggressive, more aggressive than the old dwarfs were."

Deariso spent three years learning how TifEagle responded to various treatments.

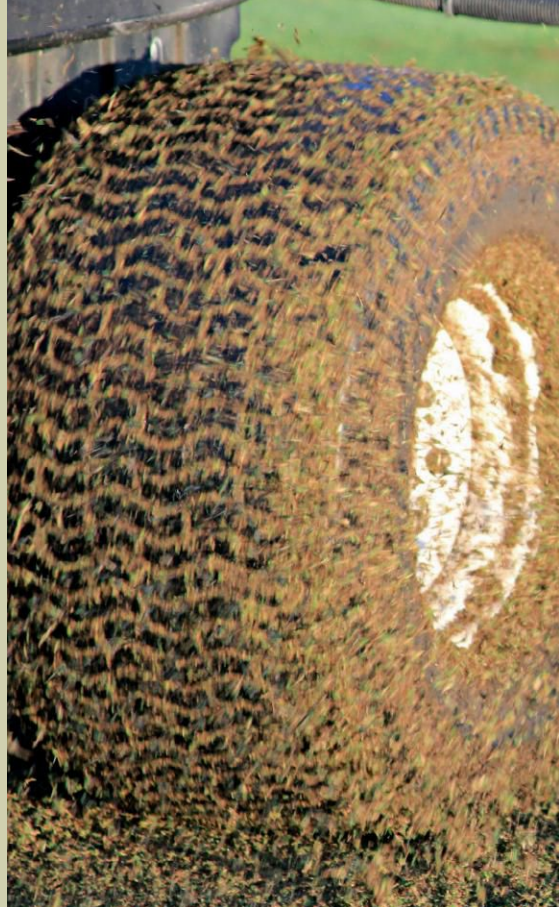
"The ultradwarfs are still a relatively new grass compared to the old dwarfs," Branthwaite says. "People are still learning about them. During the past 10 years, what Chris learned and what we've realized at McArthur is they're extremely aggressive. You have to be aggressive when treating them. If you don't, you'll pay the price."

Each year Deariso became more aggressive with verticutting, topdress-

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Chris Deariso implements an aggressive program to combat a difficult thatch problem.

BY DAN JACOBS



ALL PHOTOS BY: WAYNE BRANTHWAITE



1. A close-up look at fairway mowers, outfitted with verticut blades, going to town on what many people considered some of the best greens in Florida. “(The members) couldn’t understand why we wanted to rip them up,” Branthwaite says, “because we’ve had such fantastic greens.”

2. Triplex mowers verticut the greens in two directions to lift and cut the remaining stems. “It’s a labor-intensive process, but we were still able to do our normal summer work,” Deariso, now the superintendent at Quail Hollow, says.

3. There was no green left on these greens upon completion of the de-thatching process.



Thatch War

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ing and core aeration. No matter how hard he battled, the thatch worsened.

“You lose ground every year in the battle to control thatch,” Deariso says. “After 10 years, we had an excessive layer of thatch. We thought we had to do something.”

It’s not that the greens were in bad shape or that McArthur’s members were complaining. It’s that the thatch was growing stems horizontally that were several inches long and tightly packed together.

“Over time, the grass becomes softer or more puffy,” Deariso says. “As it became more puffy, the mower blades were starting to dig in. When we were at extremely low mowing heights below .100, to .080, we’d scalp. Every year we’d have to raise our mowing heights a little bit higher to prevent the scalping.”

Deariso began with a heavy verticutting and topdressing program during the growing season.

“We were trying to do the best we could to control it, but because of the growth habits of these grasses, you lose ground from Day One,” he says.

That couldn’t go on forever, so Deariso sought an alternative. He wanted to avoid regrassing the greens, which would force the course to close for some time at a high cost. There was also a concern recently because three area courses were shipped contaminated sprigs, Branthwaite says.

“We were apprehensive to go out and buy grass from a supplier, because there is always that unknown of what you’re getting,” Deariso says.

That risk, coupled with the expense, led Deariso to a less expensive option. He intensified his aggressive dethatching program.

“It’s a labor-intensive process, but we were still able to do our normal summer work,” he says. (For full details see sidebar above).

“When we looked at what he was doing, a lot of people were cautious and fearful of what the results were going to be,” Branthwaite says. “I said, ‘Chris, I’ve seen it before. This is what used to happen.’”

Branthwaite might have seen something similar back in his early days as a certified superintendent in



(Top) A close-up of the soil profile, showing the thatch problem. (Middle) What the greens looked like after Step 1, the fairway mower verticut. (Bottom) A look at the green upon completion of the 9 steps.

TAKING CONTROL

Chris Deariso, former superintendent at McArthur Golf Club, developed an aggressive dethatching process to fight aggressively growing TifEagle ultradwarf bermudagrass.

The process was as effective as it was difficult to explain to members who were happy with the quality of the greens.

“We had some of the top three or four greens in the country in the eight years Chris was there,” says Wayne Branthwaite, vice president of Nick Price Golf Course Design, and a former certified superintendent. “None of our members could understand it because we’ve had such fantastic greens. They couldn’t understand why we would want to rip them up. You can’t explain those things to members.

That’s one of the reasons we did the YouTube video. That’s the only way we could show and explain to them what needed to be done.”

THE PROCESS

Step 1. It begins with a fairway mower, fitted with verticut blades. The knives are spaced

1 in. apart and 0.5 in. deep. The green is verticut in four different directions.

Step 2. A blower is hitched to a utility cart, and the material is blown into windrows so it can be picked up and removed from the green.

Step 3. A triplex verticuts the greens in two directions to lift and cut the remaining stems.

Step 4. A walk-behind mower cuts more stems raised from the verticutter. Buckets collect and remove material from the green.

Step 5. The greens are brushed again to lift the remaining stems, which are cut with a walk-behind mower.

Steps 6-8. The same process of verticutting, cutting, brushing and cutting is repeated another three times, removing the layers of thatch down to the soil.

Step 9. The final step is to hollow-tine the greens using a 5/8-in. coring tine. The cores are brushed back into the green, and the process is finished.

To see the process in action and hear Deariso explain it, view the video on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uSt8b_ZEWs.

South Africa, but few others recalled seeing something like it, and Deariso and Branthwaite had to explain to McArthur’s members what was going on. In essence, they removed several layers of thatch down to the soil level.

The grass has returned since, and thatch is no longer an issue.

“We’ve given ourselves another couple of years by reducing the thatch and continuing to manage the thatch aggressively,” Branthwaite says.

Deariso believes the intense dethatching process won’t need to be done for several years, and it beats having to regrass every 10 years.

“We like to be on the cutting edge of some of the things we do — some of the practices and processes we go through,” Deariso says. “We didn’t know it was going to work. We practiced, and we felt confident. We did it, and it worked.” ■

Dan Jacobs is a writer based in Cleveland, Ohio.