

CE?!?



PHOTO BY: RYAN BOCKMULLER; PHOTO (INSET) COURTESY: MATT SHAFFER

What changed

“I don’t know where to start,” said Mid-Atlantic Director for the USGA Green Section Stan Zontek. “Number one, if you look at the demographics of today’s golfer — husband and wife, two kids, young professional — unfortunately, they don’t have time to play golf. But they have time to practice. Everything we see is all about practice.”

The game, too, has changed along with golf equipment and players’ desire for immediate results, Zontek said. Golf practice first became a factor in the 1970s with the development of the graphite shaft, he asserted. “People wanted to hit the graph-

ite shaft to see if the ball went farther than with a steel shaft,” he said. “And they had to go to a practice range to find out. That’s when people started to compare golf clubs... It started then to snowball.”

As golf gravitates more toward practice, older golf courses worldwide struggle to adapt. They simply don’t have space to expand. Even in St. Andrews, Scotland, Zontek said, one course had to abandon two holes and redesign to make room for a practice range.

Zontek’s USGA counterpart Bob Brame, the North Central Director for the USGA Green Section, observes the same space constraints among older courses in his region. Without a doubt, those that can expand should, he said.

Practice areas “pull players in,” he said. “A facility that has a good practice area is going to draw players more and hold ‘em once they get there. Investing in practice areas is money well spent. That’s the bottom line. There’s no question that people are more into practicing now than 10 or 15 years ago.”

Merion Golf Club

The management at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa. recognized that too, and from October to December 2010 the club’s practice area underwent a \$2 million renovation.

Today, the club’s practice area features a 6,000-square-foot learning center; 38,000 square feet of Penn Trio bentgrass driving range tees; and a 12,000-square-foot chipping area complete with a green and two bunkers.

Merion revamped its practice area to help the club’s head golf pro, Scott Nye, who had elevated the club’s junior golf program but didn’t have the amenities necessary to take his program a step higher.

“Before, it was horrendous,” said Merion Director of Golf Course Operations Matt Shaffer of the club’s practice area. “We didn’t have an indoor teaching facility at all, and our tee was grossly undersized. Our chipping area was terrible.”

Nye arrived at the club in 2000. By 2004, Shaffer said, “Scott had interest in golf really churning here. It was painfully obvious he needed a facility to teach in.”

Now, Nye works out of a greystone learning facility that matches the club’s original quarrystone. While reminiscent of a home from the outside, inside, the learning facility features

three heated, state-of-the-art teaching bays, a club fitting center, upgraded camera and computer hardware for client instruction, and a small living room with a fireplace.

Pre-renovation, Nye took clients to Florida for winter instruction. Now, he doesn’t have to. “It can be snowing like crazy and he can put the garage doors up and hit out onto the range,” Shaffer said.

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Merion’s 6,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art learning center.

Practice Makes Perfect

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Merion's new sand-based chipping area, meanwhile, enables members to replicate any golf shot, including fairway and bunker shots. It also has extensive drainage and a precision air system underneath it to keep it dry.

"It kind of culminates what we are at Merion," Shaffer said of the practice facility. "On the golf course, it was our last weak link. Now, it completes us."

World Woods Golf Club

"It's a monster."

That's how James Rawlings, director of golf course maintenance at World Woods Golf Club, Brooksville, Fla., describes the club's 2-acre hillside practice putting green.

And the mammoth putting green is just one component of World Woods' renowned practice area.

The club also boasts a 22-acre circular driving range with bunkers, target greens and target fairways; a nine-hole, 1,800-yard short course; and three practice holes ranging from a par-3 to a par-5.

The practice area's best attribute is its size, said World Woods head golf pro Scott Wyckoff. The driving range was built in 1993. At the time, it was believed to be the largest range in the United States. "It kind of started a trend," Rawlings said.

The club built the range so that tour players could practice in any type of situation. "Angle-wise, left to right, wind, rain, you can do that," Wyckoff said.

But despite the demand for World Woods' mammoth practice facility, Wyckoff isn't ready to say wholeheartedly that golf is becoming a game of practice, especially at a public destination resort like World Woods.

Economy a factor

Even so, World Woods has its share of tour players, collegiate teams and junior golfers who come down solely to practice, Wyckoff said, adding there's no doubt the economy has changed the game's landscape.

"People are not as comfortable as they were six, seven years ago," he said. "It's not the same environment. The days when people were a little bit more comfortable in their job, when companies could write things off, that was yesterday."



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It's why many World Woods golfers tee up on the 9-hole short course, which costs \$17 a round, Rawlings said. "A lot of the older couples on fixed incomes or who have been hurt financially are migrating to the cheaper golf," he said.

Orange County National

At Orlando's Orange County National Golf Course and Lodge, home to two reputable 18-hole public courses, Director of Golf Alan Walker has on his hands one of the most extensive practice areas in the country. It's an area that includes a 9-hole executive course, a learning facility, two putting greens, a chipping area — and the largest driving range in the U.S.

The 42-acre, circular driving range is one mile in circumference. It is surrounded by four target greens with bunkers for a "real golf course experience," Walker said. And the range's eight sets of tee boxes, which like the bowl of the range feature bermudagrass, rotate from front to back.

"We have a lot of demand for the practice area around here," Walker said. The area also includes "The Studio," a hitting area featuring artificial turf, covered hitting bays, offices and video classrooms.

That variety is exactly what practice ranges need in order to compete, Zontek said. "There have to be several components to it," he said. "A big practice range tee that would allow people to practice on grass. They usually have some artificial turf, too — they need both. And they've got to have all-weather surfaces.

"They have to be 300-plus yards long. They need to have target greens... Then you've got to have the building for your teaching. You have to have a bunker — usually there are several. You've also got to have a short game area."

So, creating a worthy practice area is not easy. But it is the future.

During the last few years, golf has declined, Walker said. That's one reason why at Orange County National "use of the practice facility has increased compared to full course use," he said.

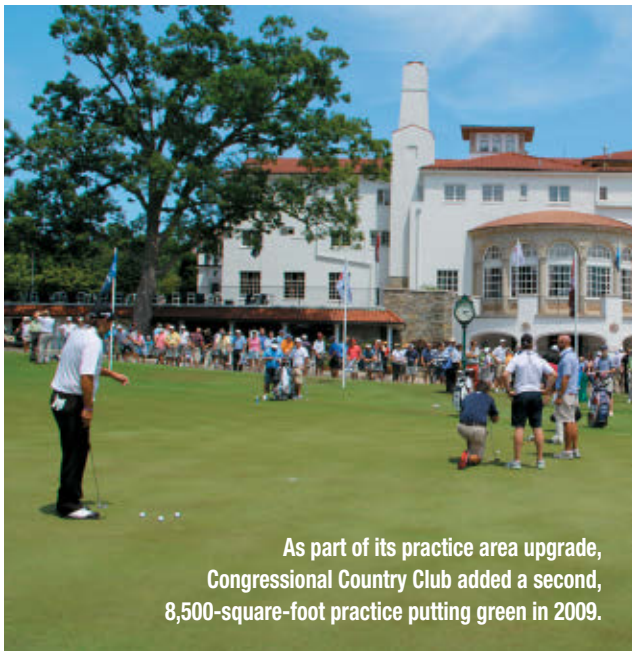
Walker attributes the jump in practice to golfers' increasingly busy lifestyles. "People can come out and still get enjoyment from the game if they can't afford the four or four and a half hours of golf," Walker said. "We get people who it's their entire agenda to come to the practice

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Practice Makes Perfect



Orange County National's 42-acre, circular driving range (left) is the largest in the country; Its par-29 short course (below) is "pretty sweet," says OCN Director of Golf Alan Walker.



As part of its practice area upgrade, Congressional Country Club added a second, 8,500-square-foot practice putting green in 2009.

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facility. It's more of a destination."

Because of the practice area's popularity, the club offers a 90-day package that includes 72 buckets of balls, complimentary walking privileges on Orange County National's 9-hole executive course, and a reduced rate for walk-on golf at the championship course.

"You don't have to play 18 holes to be considered a golfer," said Walker. "Golf practice is taking on a more important role as an alternative to traditional golf rounds. I would think that you can practice mostly and still consider yourself a golfer."

Congressional Country Club

"It's something that our members wanted. And it definitely gets a lot of use throughout the course of the year."

So says Congressional Country Club Director of Golf Course Maintenance Mike Giuffre of the club's short game practice area. Congressional last revamped its driving range in 2005, adding target greens to the range floor. In the late summer of 2009, its short game practice area underwent a major upgrade, too. Until then, it consisted of just one putting green and one chipping green, with limited fairway grass from which to chip.

"We blew it all up and started over," Giuffre said. Congressional constructed a new 8,500-square-foot putting green and "we put in a pitching area and a chipping area," Giuffre said. "We added more fairway grass along with the rough, so they can practice shots off of both fairway and rough conditions." The chipping green has three bunkers and consumes 12,000 square feet.

"What we had before just didn't provide [members] with all the avenues to practice all the different shots that they were interested in doing," Giuffre said.

The renovations were a good move, he added, especially because "in today's society, more and more people are working longer hours. So this is a chance for them to get in a few shots and still feel like they're working on their game."

Here to stay

Giuffre said Congressional's observance that more people practice today than they did 10 years ago, and more often, was the driving force behind Congressional's upgrades. "It's like the old adage 'If you build it they will come,'" he said.

Practice is good for the game, Zontek said. And like it or not, "this practice thing isn't going to go away soon. It's really not. It's going to progress." ■

Design *on a* Dime

} A Central Pennsylvania golf course manager throws out the book on successful golf course operations and writes his own.

BY BILL WALL



The economy has exposed many weak golf operations in our market and a terrible weather year has pushed them to the brink of failure. Some are failing because they were poorly managed, others due to a terrible location, but most often the course is simply no longer a sustainable product.

Too many courses have evolved (or perhaps devolved) into products that cannot possibly compete in a price point market such as ours. Some have built lavish clubhouses they can barely heat, let alone fill. Some publicly funded facilities were built and funded by bond issues,

and today the corresponding debt is not manageable. Still others simply are difficult and expensive to maintain because of their acreage, design or aging infrastructure. And my favorite, those folks who were intent on reinventing the wheel, not realizing it was fine to begin with.

In a golf market such as ours, how can these courses compete where the price point for everyone is so similar and maintenance and management expenses are so high? The bottom line is that a golf course cannot survive unless it can be offered at a competitive price profitably.

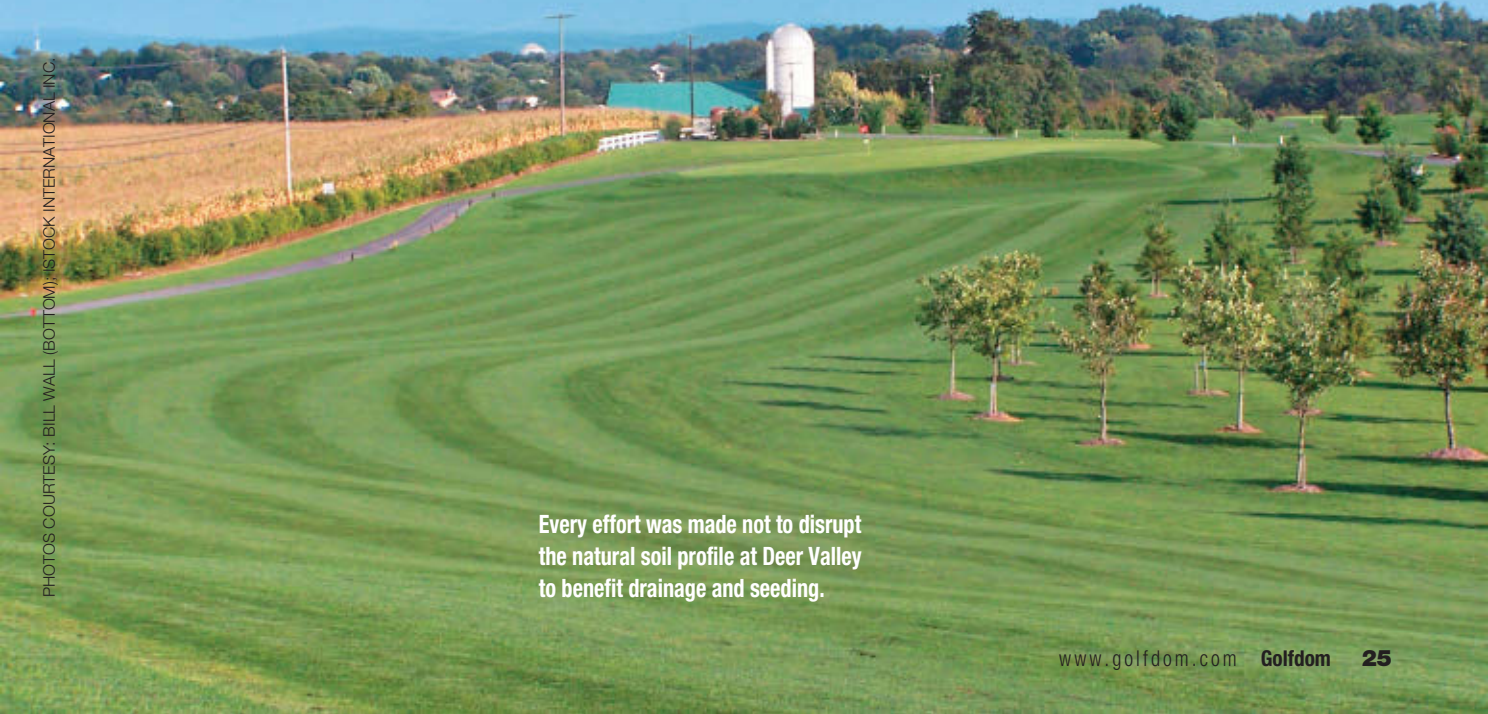
So how do you build and manage a golf course in a struggling market like ours? It starts by being able to rationally

separate what we want from what we need and prioritizing what we need to do rather than what we want to do.

My current project typifies that logic. Our goal at Deer Valley Golf Course in Hummelstown, Pa., is to offer our product at a competitive price point. Construction and maintenance costs had to allow us to reach that goal.

The upshot is a competitively priced, well maintained facility and successful business. Here's how we did it.

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Every effort was made not to disrupt the natural soil profile at Deer Valley to benefit drainage and seeding.

Deer Valley Golf Course

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Building a winner

Construction of Deer Valley began in the spring of 2003, and we opened in May of 2005. I designed all the features of the course, keeping in mind that everything had to be easy to maintain because I would not have a full-time staff. I also constantly reminded myself that if a project could go from planning and permitting to opening for less than \$2 million, the odds of it profiting for the owners, even in a tight market, increased.

It won't surprise you that the \$10-per-square-foot-plus cost of building USGA or California greens was out of the question. The only option was push-up greens. No material could be hauled out or hauled in. We stripped the topsoil, formed the features with the shaley subsoil, then capped the shale with the topsoil.

Since the percolation rate of the soil is so low, we allowed for sufficient pitch on the surface to accommodate water movement. All the greens were elevated; all free water was diverted from the features with surface swales. Special attention was given to air circulation, morning sun and fill requirements when deciding on a location.

Topdressing with a uniform mason sand began almost immediately. The soil was neither sifted nor sterilized. The greens were seeded to a blend of four bentgrasses and average over 7,000 square feet. The finished product does not have collars nor a mowed approach.

The first priority with the tees was size, both length and width. We have 25 tees averaging just under 4,700 square feet. One large tee was preferred to several small tees when possible to save mow time and for overall ease of maintenance. The tees were seeded to a blend of 10-12 perennial ryegrasses.

We only moved soil in locations that couldn't possibly receive a golf shot. Every effort was made to minimize the disruption to the natural soil profile, realizing it would drain better and the seedlings

would develop faster if left intact. The site had previously been used to graze cattle, so the fairways were sprayed with glyphosate then lightly disked, graded and seeded. Excessive organic material was moved into the rough and shaped into mounds. We seeded the mounds to a blend of Kentucky bluegrasses and 20-percent perennial rye.

Our bunkers are all grass, not sand. I installed a single drain line to remove water, and they are all large enough to be mowed with a triplex or similar machine. We installed an 8-foot continuous asphalt cart path, and the irrigation is a Toro LTC with 800S series heads with no central controller. Fairways and tees are a single row system and the greens are looped with 4-6 heads. Sprinklers are the same throughout, but nozzle sizes vary as needed.

Employees and equipment

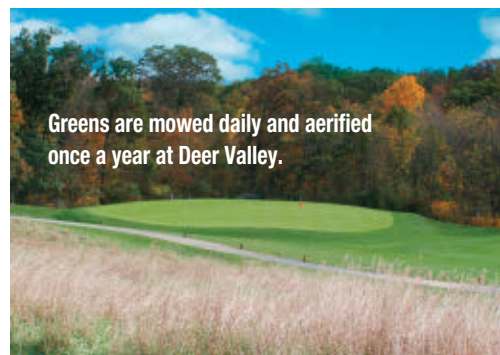
I am the only full-time employee at Deer Valley, wearing both the hats of general manager and superintendent.

I outsource my skilled people such as irrigation tech and mechanic, usually from other golf courses. The remainder of my staff is composed of part-time seasonal employees. The size of the staff can vary from 3 in the winter to 40 in mid-season. Shifts are usually 5 to 6 hours in length, and weekly hours rarely exceed 25.

I make it clear to all that I need them more than they will ever need me and it is beneficial to all that they evolve into a job and shift that suits them best. It took about three years for us to develop into an efficient staff.

Virtually all equipment is purchased used from vendors or other courses. Operators must constantly be made aware of the potential for hydraulic leaks or other problems. Many of my employees use the same machines regularly. Eventually they may take responsibility for daily maintenance of those machines.

Greens and tees are mowed with triplexes; fairways with 5-plex mowers; primary rough with gang mowers; and far rough with a 16-foot, three-deck rotary.



Greens are mowed daily and aerified once a year at Deer Valley.

The cart fleet was purchased used and we expect to get 12 years of service before we begin replacement. When removed from service, carts and equipment are cannibalized for serviceable parts as needed then scrapped.

The pro shop is a barn, circa 1790. It has been refurbished to accommodate the pro shop, a small food and beverage operation and a dining area that seats 50. The second floor is used for cart storage. An attached two-car garage is our maintenance shop. An open dining pavilion was



Bill Wall leans against a bulkhead being built this winter behind No. 9 green at Deer Valley.

mask the brown patch and gray leaf spot issues on the ryegrass and the ryegrass will mask the summer patch on the bluegrass. Greens are sprayed weekly with below-label rates of contact fungicides and fertilizer. Annual nitrogen usage on the greens is between 1 to 2 pounds per 1,000 ft² and we aerify once a year. Maybe most importantly, we have successfully maintained the integrity of the turfgrass stand and kept the annual bluegrass population in check.

I'm proud to be in our sixth full year of operation. We do between 35,000 and 40,000 rounds of golf annually. Our dollar per golfer is near the market average, and expenses typically run 50 percent of revenue. Our play consists of: 33 percent discounted play through our own offers or third party advertisers; 20 percent league play; 10 percent outing; and the remainder off the street. The bulk of our play occurs between April and October. Greens fees and carts account for 73 percent of our revenue, outings 13 percent, food and beverage 10 percent and merchandise 4 percent.

This format won't work for everyone. But for a person or municipality with a suitable site, this may offer a means to build a golf course or a format to operate it. Again, if a project could go from planning and permitting to opening for less than \$2 million, many projects certainly become more plausible.

All of these thoughts and theories could have just bounced around in my head forever if I had not met the owners, Bob and Sally Stern. They had a dream of owning a golf course and the courage to pursue their dream. Both are savvy business people who are adamant in running an effective business.

Today I feel very fortunate to have been the one they trusted to build, manage and maintain their dream. ■

Bill Wall is the general manager and superintendent of Deer Valley Golf Course in Hummelstown, Pa. He can be reached at bwallgcbwall@yahoo.com.



We have 25 tees averaging just under 4,700 square feet. One large tee was preferred to several small tees when possible to save mow time and for overall ease of maintenance.

built for our larger outings, and several detached garages serve as cold storage for equipment.

It's a far cry from some of my previous shops and clubhouses, but the shop is functional, the pro shop efficient and the food service profitable.

Maintaining the dream

My maintenance philosophy is to keep it simple and just grow grass. No PGRs and only contact fungicides. We maintain the bluegrass fairways between .75" and 1", tees at .5" to .75" and greens at .12" to .14". We maintain rigid mowing schedules where greens are mowed daily; tees, fairways and primary rough every other day; and far rough and trim work weekly or as needed.

Fairways are not sprayed with fungicides; tees are sprayed as needed. The genetic diversity of the fairways helps mask many of the disease issues we deal with. For instance, the Kentucky bluegrass will



THE *Golfdom* CONVERSATION:

David Withers

NEW JACOBSEN
PRESIDENT
PROMISES TO BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS
WITH CUSTOMERS
AND DISTRIBUTORS.

BY SETH JONES



"It's encouraging for people to see a guy work his way up to the top of a company," David Withers says. And that is what Withers has done at Jacobsen.

Promoted to the position of president last fall, Withers had been serving as managing director of the Ransomes division of Jacobsen, located in the United Kingdom, since January 2005. Withers, who first joined Jacobsen's parent company, Textron, in 1992, succeeds Dan Wilkinson. Wilkinson retired from Jacobsen after 14 years with the company.

Golfdom had the opportunity to chat with Withers recently about his background as a mechanic, his immediate goals for Jacobsen, and if ghosts of the late '90s still haunt the company.

Golfdom: What's the difference in the European market and the American market, for both Jacobsen and golf in general?

David Withers: Golf customers want pretty much the same thing all around the world, and that's good products and a nice relationship with their dealers. I'm unsurprised by that.

I will say there seems to be a little bit of a difference in getting financing here (in North America) than what I've experienced in Europe. The lending institutions seem to be viewing golf less favorably here

"Whenever you make a decision, keep your eyes fixed firmly on the customer," Withers says, "and you'll make the right decision."

than they are in Europe. I'm not used to getting an order, then seeing difficulty in getting it financed.

Golfdom: Is there a difference in the perception of Jacobsen here than the perception in Europe?

Withers: There's probably been more dealer stability in Europe than we've been able to enjoy in North America. Generally where we've had a lot of dealer changes, our brand is less well regarded than where we've been more consistent. You could probably say we've had more dealer changes in North America than we have had in Europe.

Golfdom: I was talking to a superintendent on the west coast, and the Jacobsen name came up. He told me he loves to see equipment, but Jacobsen was just not a company that's been to his course to give him demos. Is there a plan to change that?

Withers: Absolutely. One of the things I think about dealers, generally speaking, is that they're pretty good at looking after their existing customer base. The difficulty is, you really do need a partnership between the manufacturer and the dealer when you're going after conquest sales, people who aren't using your equipment at the moment.

I'm very interested in working a partnership with dealers to really go after conquest accounts and show people the Jacobsen product, people who haven't seen the product in maybe 10 years. We really have an opportunity if we can get that right. The product is good, the back-up is good, it's just a matter of building relationships.

You'll also see, over the next few



“It’s all about getting out of that shadow and saying, ‘That was 10 years ago, we are a very different company now.’”

months, we’re putting additional sales guys out there, actual Jacobsen employees. I’ve also added a new position, vice president of customer care. I believe it’s important that we have one point of contact to look after our customers post-sale.

Golfdom: Back in the late '90s, early 2000s, there was a lot of confusion surrounding Jacobsen. There seemed to always be a new name, there were problems getting parts to customers... is that shadow still cast on Jacobsen?

Withers: I think it’s patchy. In some places, we are definitely out of that shadow. I think for some people, we let them down so badly in the late '90s and 2000, even though it was 10 years ago, the scars are still there.

It’s all sorted and it has been for a few years now. It’s about getting the perception right. We want to look to some thought leaders, people who are looked up to and respected. Maybe we can’t get them to buy our equipment right now, but we definitely want to be to the point where they’ll look at our equipment as a credible alternative.

We know if we can get into a golf course and sell them one bit of equipment, we’ve got a very good chance of selling them a second piece. They’ll be

surprised not only by our performance, but also our support.

It’s all about getting out of that shadow, as you rightfully put it, and saying, ‘That was 10 years ago, we are a very different company now.’

Golfdom: So let’s talk about today. What excites you about the Jacobsen line right now?

Withers: Our riding greens mowers are a great story. The 322, they’re scientifically shown to give a superior cut and superior playing conditions. But obviously you pay for that. But we also offer a value end, and that’s something we want to continue. We still sell the Greens King IV, I wonder how many thousands of those we’ve sold? We want to be relevant to both markets, premium but also value.

Golfdom: I read that you were once a mechanic? Do you still like to get under the hood?

I’ll tell you a story. My granddad owned a big Volvo garage. When I was 10, I’d go and muck about with cars and motor-

bikes. In high school, I went and worked in Kenya for two-and-a-half years, fixing equipment, helping build schools, hospitals, things like that. When I came back (to the UK), my friend and I started a little business buying and selling cars and used equipment that we fixed. We sold that business to a subsidiary of Redexim. So I worked for Redexim for two, three years. Then I joined Jacobsen. So I’ve always wielded a spanner (wrench). Though I do less of it now than I used to, but I certainly know how our products work.

Golfdom: Any parting shots?

Withers: I have a clear message to our group on how to succeed, I call it the three Bs: Build a relationship; Build a good product; Back it up for the whole of its life. If we do those three things correctly, we’ll be in the game and we’ll win. But if we muck it up we’ll be in trouble.

Ten to 12 years ago, we weren’t doing any of these things well. We’ve since sorted out the last two, the back-up and the machinery. Now, our focus is on building relationships with customers. That’s what (Jacobsen) brought me in to do, and that’s what I’ll be concentrating on in the next weeks and months. ■

Clark Talks Turf

■ TIMELY TURF ADVICE



→ A Warm, Dry Winter Brings Challenges

BY CLARK THROSSELL, PH.D.

It has been a warm, dry winter across much of the country. For many golf courses in the central and northern parts of the country this is the old good news, bad news scenario. First the good news, the warm weather brings out golfers and the money they spend to play golf, rent carts, purchase merchandise and food and beverages. In many central and northern locations, any revenue during December, January and February is an unexpected bonus and helps get 2012 off to a good financial start.

And now for the bad news. Traffic from golfers and carts wears out the grass. It is a challenge to get golfers to understand that despite the favorable weather for golf, it is not warm enough for the grass plants to grow. And sustained growth is how turfgrass plants cope with the wear that traffic brings. While air temperatures are in the 40s, 50s and maybe even the low 60s, that is not warm enough to achieve sustained turfgrass growth. Also, keep in mind that it is slow to warm up in the morning and fast to cool off in late afternoon, so the grass only experiences warm temperatures for a very short period of time in the middle of the day.

What can be done to manage the traffic that comes with winter golf? Banning golf carts in winter would be a great first step, but that just isn't going to happen for two very important reasons: revenue and golfer pref-

erence. Since golf carts will be used during the winter, it becomes a matter of limiting the damage they cause.

Some superintendents try to restrict golf cart traffic to roughs only with fairway crossing allowed at 90 degrees. This works for some and not others. On golf courses with zoysiagrass or bermudagrass fairways and cool season grass rough, golf carts are often restricted to rough only during

“It is a challenge to get golfers to understand that despite the favorable weather for golf, it is not warm enough for the grass plants to grow.”

the winter. On these courses in the transition zone the cool season grass rough often stays green throughout the winter and makes it easier for golfers to abide by the rough-only rule.

Fairways that are subjected to regular golf cart traffic in the winter in northern locations with cool season grass should be prepared for diminished fairway quality in the spring and even into early summer. It will

take that long for the grass to grow and recover. Take photos of traffic patterns now so you can refresh memories in spring if wear damage is apparent. Inform those in leadership positions at the club of the potential problem now while they can see the traffic patterns.

Using ropes, stakes, signs and any other traffic control device is a good idea to spread traffic out near greens and tees. Or you can confine traffic to a single route and then sod the damaged areas in the spring. Or maybe using both strategies on different areas of the golf course makes sense for you.

Traffic management on putting greens is a challenge as well. If the golf course is located where the soil doesn't freeze, changing cups as needed is a great way to evenly distribute wear. In northern locations where the soil freezes, superintendents often place three or four cups on a single green. The cups are widely spaced to help distribute wear. While some golf courses ask that the golfers rotate the flag among the cups on a single green, it might make more sense for the superintendent to rotate the flags among the cups. This way the superintendent can observe each green and make the decision where to place the flag to better manage wear.

Warmer winter weather brings the golfers out of hibernation and out on to the fairways. There is no single right answer to managing traffic in winter. Do what makes sense at your golf course.

Clark Throssell, Ph.D., is a turfgrass scientist and can be reached at cthrossell@questex.com.