

## A Player's Perspective

# Do We Overgroom Our Golf Courses

By Dr. David Cookson



Green budgets are a large slice of a golf club's expense, and consequently loom large when Boards of Directors in financially pressed clubs, like many these days, are looking for places to pare costs. In this circumstance controversy may often erupt over projects that might appear to one Board member or another to be a non-essential waste of club monies, and lead to the charge that the green budget must be too large if the green superintendent can expend his money so frivolously. This kind of thinking leads next to doubts of a green superintendent's and a green chairman's competence, if not quickly dealt with and carefully explained. Perhaps then, a discussion of "grooming," in the broadest sense, is in order; with emphasis on what is essential and what is merely window dressing or unnecessary.

I would argue that grooming can be broken down into three broad categories; that which is essential to good maintenance, that which is desirable, and that which is mostly unnecessary, although often practiced. The individual club's budget, and membership preferences will determine largely the nature of the grooming that is done, but it is mandatory for good maintenance that the essential work be accomplished. This would include tight mowing and defining of the tee area, along with keeping the tee turf level, and prompt repair of worn spots. Here grooming pays off both in aesthetics and playability. Certainly fairway and rough areas should be well delineated, with careful mowing of fairways so that the ball sits up and is playable, with the rough visibly defined and properly maintained in the area adjacent to the fairway. Trees should be trimmed, with weeds and long grasses at the bases cut back or treated with growth retardant. Bunkers must be neatly raked, and often; free of weeds and debris, edged and outlined in a careful manner. If long grass is to be kept around bunkers it should be in an obviously defined area, and not allowed to be intrusive in an unkempt fashion. Bunker appearance is one of the most visible ways in which general course maintenance can be judged at a glance. Greens of course must be mowed daily, in season, with prompt attention to repair of dead areas and low spots. I would hope all would agree with these things as grooming necessities.

Desirable grooming, but able to be sacrificed to a strict and constrictive budget, would include flower beds, aggressive maintenance of water hazards, and replacement of poorly adapted grasses by more favorable strains. Flowers are a definite beautifying and aesthetically pleasing addition to a golf course, and if placed out of immediate play and thoughtfully nurtured will win praise to the green superintendent. Still, they are not required for the playing of golf; and if excessive, or too obtrusive, may create more ill

will than plaudits. Water hazards can be left alone; but if unsightly weeds or algae dominate the water hazards it is aesthetically advantageous to deal with these problems. In my experience though, sometimes the costs outweigh the benefits, and this is one kind of grooming that one should initiate only after a careful reading of Board and membership desires. Clearing a water hazard is time consuming and slow, and if hand labor is to be employed, is best done at times of slow member play, since one of the worst advertisements for the diligence of one's crew is slow hand work, visible to all, on areas of the course not totally essential to play. Lastly, most would agree it is desirable to replace poa with bluegrass in the rough close to the fairway, or in the collar around greens. But, this too is a highly visible form of hand labor, and also not completely essential. Despite the fact that a good case can be made for doing this, I can personally attest to its implementation sometimes leading to significant criticism of green committee practices by a Board trying to watch and cut costs.

Finally, I think certain practices are "overgrooming" and wasteful. This includes frequent mowing and meticulous maintenance of distant rough areas, and even continued grooming of fairway areas that are generally out of play as fairway. Use of excessive water only to keep greens soft is not only deleterious to green turf, but also overgrooming; as is use of fertilizers only to keep the grass green. Overgrooming is mowing too many banked areas as fairway and not as rough; indeed, the overgroomed course often appears to be one expanse of closely mown grass. Allow the secondary rough to grow to a significant height so that it is not mowed too often, and allow the rough to come up close to the sides and rear of green surfaces. When the golf course begins to look more like a park than a golf course, is when the possibility of overgrooming should be considered.

In summary, I think overgrooming occurs when a particular club spends a lot of effort and money on parts of the course not essential to play, or if non-essential areas are given priority over important problem situations on the playing part of the course. At the same time, we must be diligent in managing our use of water, fertilizer, and herbicides so that they are utilized only where really necessary and so they are not wasted. As you will agree, these are really the primary duties of the green superintendent and the green chairman anyway.