

## 1986: THE YEAR OF THE WEATHER

By Michael Semler

The 1986 season has finally wound down to a slow pace and hopefully our golf courses are bedded down for the winter. It seems an appropriate time to try and put the past year in perspective and to put together some type of historical record so that in the future our peers may look back and get an idea of what we faced in 1986.

Where to begin on such a project seems difficult, but is really quite simple. The most prevalent topic of discussion this year was the weather. It affected us greatly in 1986, maybe more so than in past years because of the lack of consistency it showed. A year ago at this time most of the state, except for southeast Wisconsin, had a good protective snow covering. Southeast Wisconsin golf courses, however, had experienced cold and freezing rains and thus went into the winter with heavy ice cover on greens, tees and fairways. Coupled with this was a relatively light year in snow cover and you had a situation ripe for turf losses. The following spring proved this. Some of our worst fears were confirmed. The first is that grasses cannot survive under ice for extended periods, and the second is that the perennial ryegrasses are not as winter hardy as we had hoped. More research and study will be required to determine the future of heavy ryegrass overseeding programs in Wisconsin.

Spring finally came and when it did, it was relatively warm and dry. Too dry, in fact, because many of us were scrambling to get our irrigation systems going. Drought conditions continued into July and August in the Northeastern and Southcentral parts of the state, while the rest of the state appeared to get some relief earlier in the season.

Once the rains started they never stopped. September and the first part of October were some of the wettest months on record. Some courses, depending on the soil and the extent of drainage, were unable to mow fairways for up to two weeks. Coupled with reports of heavy dollar spot infections in September, these made for a disastrous fall.

If 1985 was a test for our irrigation system, 1986 had to be a test for our drainage systems. The talk among Superintendents changed early in the season from irrigation systems to "French Drains" and slit trenches. 1987 may see an increase in the amount of drain tile laid because of the disastrously wet fall of 1986. Chances are, if your construction was not completed by September, it may be spring before it is.

If the rains seemed to raise havoc, either because of too much or too little, this year's temperatures seemed to reduce the amount and extent of disease pressure. Reports on disease seemed nothing out of the ordinary and most of us were able to keep diseases under control by preventative or curative spray schedules. Chemical sales, however, did not reflect this attitude. Most distributors reported increased sales in chemicals, even in pythium control materials, although lengthy and severe outbreaks of pythium were uncommon. It could be that the overall value of a disease control program is becoming more common as more courses are making the extra expenditures to keep diseases in check.

We continue to have an increasing awareness on soil agronomics and thatch control. The institution of the triplex mowers on fairways, in the past thought of as a luxury for the high budget clubs, is becoming commonplace on low and average budget courses. The advantages of lightweight mowers in reducing soil compaction, in lower cutting heights and even coupled with clipping removal is becoming more evident as more golf courses start on this management strategy. Another benefit of triplex mowers was evident this fall. Prevailing wet conditions allowed only the lightest equipment on our courses, and those Superintendents with triplex mowers on fairways were able to keep up with normal mowing and those Superintendents with heavier mowers were unable to move.

Sales in the triplex mowers for fairways probably peaked in 1984 and

1985. Reported sales were down in 1986. However, more interest had been expressed in the 5-gang mowers this year and it appears fewer clubs were willing to take the labor intensive plunge with triplex mowers. If nothing else, 1986 proved that lightweight mowers are here to stay and that clubs are willing to pay for the "Augusta Look" on fairways.

Like everything else, new problems are on the horizon. The floating head triplex and 5-gang mowers on fairway are causing an increased concern on thatch levels and its control on fairways. More interest has been expressed in using greens type aerifiers on fairways and more Superintendents are determined to bring up as much soil as possible with existing fairway aerifiers, to help alleviate thatch accumulations. Our management strategies on fairways are slowly becoming more like green and tee management as golfers demand even firmer and truer lies.

Along the same lines of thought of better fairway turf, the past few years have seen an increasing awareness on the amount of irrigation to help avoid over-watering and wet fairway lies. We have seen an increased amount of hand watering on greens, tees and now fairways to help even up soil moisture levels and increase turf consistencies. Golfers are demanding less "plug" lies and more roll on fairways, and we continued to improve our water and thatch control programs in 1986.

The 1986 Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium focused our attention on the relatively new concept of Micronutrients and their management. Gone are the days when fertilizer programs are based strictly on Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium needs. Programs of the more recent past, and the future as well, no doubt include applications of Iron and Sulfur and will focus more on the micronutrients. In addition, some of the strange or unrecognizable problems in turf may not be related to deficiencies in N, P or K, but may in fact be related to micronutrient deficiencies or interactions between them.

Nitrogen application rates continue to remain around the 1-2 pounds actual nitrogen/1000 sq. ft. on greens and around 3 pounds actual nitrogen on fairways. This is far below the 6-10 pound rates common just 10 years ago. Once again our management level and efficiency continue to improve in 1986.

This year saw no large changes in greens management; however, we did not remain stagnant. Replacing triplex



greensmowers with walking mowers continues to be the talk, but there was no significant increase in golf courses making the switch. Once again this is probably due to the labor intensiveness. Don't be surprised if in the near future a major switch does occur with more courses taking to the walking mower route. The advantages are well documented.

Topdressing and the materials used to continue to be discussed and debated. Straight sand and sand/peat mixtures are still being used to convert greens to ones with a high sand content. Light and frequent applications are still the rule of thumb to avoid the thatch-soil layering effect. We see and learn that choosing good quality materials is essential. The proper particle size and the proper chemical balance is critical when choosing a sand. For those using mixtures of sand and peat, the quality of the peat used is just as important as the quality of the sand.

Fast greens are still a hot topic, the golfers generally love them, the turf does not. In the past, to attain fast greens we lowered the height of cut to 9/64, 1/8 or even to 1/10 of an inch, withheld fertilizer and kept them droughty to keep up green speeds. Everyone knew there could be

associated problems with this type of management program. This year, however, Jacobsen manufacturing introduced their "Turf Groomer" on greensmowers. The effect is an extremely light verticut everytime the greens are mowed to remove upper running leaf blades. The documented results show that fast greens can be maintained at higher cutting heights, while not further sacrificing turf quality. The future could be bright for applying this type of system.


Our affiliations with the WGCSA and the GCSAA continue to improve. The state membership in both continues to rise. 1986 saw an increase of 26 members in the WGCSA to a total of 260 and the state membership in the GCSAA should climb to 100 by the end of the year. The value of our involvement in our professional organizations is self evident and strong professional ties become essential now more than ever. Efforts are continuing to keep increasing these numbers.

Along the same lines, attendance at our monthly meetings increased and there was once again strong attendance at the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. Good interaction between Superintendents and another year of good quality speakers definitely played

a key role in the attendance levels. These are all affirming our association's commitment to improved education and involvement.

Gene Haas, Executive Director of the WSGA, reports that in general, attendance at the state tournament level was up from last year. Tournament conditions were excellent and related problems were minimal and not out of the ordinary. Increased promotion on the part of the WSGA and I would hope that better tournament conditions on the part of the Superintendents were the key factors in this increase.

The golf courses we manage and the game of golf which the Superintendent greatly influences as part of his management is on a roll. Heightened interest in the game can be credited to increased promotion, but it is my opinion that the better quality of golf turf and the Superintendents' direct responsibility for those conditions is as big a factor as any. Let's hope that history deems 1986 as one of the key years in the history of golf. The concerns about over-management on golf courses and our management levels becoming too technical, I hope, are unfounded. Only the future and our history will tell. But it seems the golfers are loving it.



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