



## Golf Course Maintenance: *Then and Now*

By Dr. David U. Cookson

Your editor has asked that I comment from the Player's Perspective on the changes in golf course maintenance that have occurred over the past 25 years as recounted by Tom Harrison elsewhere in this newsletter. I intend to first make a few general observations, then be a little more specific, and conclude with opinions as to what still needs to be accomplished.

The game of golf itself has evolved somewhat, which in turn has influenced golf course maintenance. A quarter century ago, golf carts were just beginning to be utilized, solid and hard cover balls were not yet invented, and general club play was at a much lower level of intensity. The effect of the golf cart on fairways and roughs is significant and obvious, the two piece ball rolls forever and will not stop on the green as quickly, and heavier play has forced the superintendent to be more imaginative in scheduling his projects and routine maintenance tasks; all of which subtly influences maintenance pressures on the superintendent. Despite increasing difficulties with compaction and turf wear due to the effects of the golf cart and increased play, I believe courses are generally in much better condition now than a generation ago, and improve gradually each year. Some of this is due to better equipment, and certainly more varied and effective pesticides and fungicides have played a role; but also increased turf research, better educated green superintendents, and the influence of television continually showing courses groomed to tournament standards has caused club members to promote better conditions at their own facilities. Today there is more emphasis on aesthetics; flower beds are in vogue, neatly trimmed clubhouse grounds extend onto the course, perhaps even to excess. At the same time, costs have escalated tremendously, requiring a lot more effort to balance managing the course

with the fiscal constraints demanded by green chairmen and boards of directors.

More specifically, there has been a substantial improvement in green maintenance. Speed is definitely increased, the green surfaces are smoother, thatch is less, and disease much less evident as a problem. This is due to less water usage, less fertilizer application, (as Tom Harrison has shown), but also to the triplex mower which has allowed greens to be mowed more often, and significantly too to better knowledge of proper green construction and topdressing practices. Along with this good news however are more complaints of greens not holding well, due to the lessened water use, and I think of more importance, the inability of the hard cover ball to "bite" the green. Some would not think the triplex mower a benefit, but I feel on balance and taking all clubs into account, it is a plus. There are some advantages for the club who can afford to use walking mowers daily, but the player appreciates the greens all mowed when play starts in the morning each day, and this was rare twenty years ago. Fairways too have improved, largely due to less use of water and better awareness of how to keep poa annua alive under stressful conditions. It was a rare course that played "summer rules" twenty years ago due to sparse areas in fairways from disease or poa decline, and many of our state fairways were kept shaggy and wet. On the other hand, roughs were probably better then than now, before the increased use of golf carts. Bunkers are now much better maintained generally with the availability of the mechanical rake, helped as well by better awareness of proper sand mixtures. Tees are generally cut shorter and have shared in the improvement of turf quality throughout the course. Many of these things have changed gradually and the golfer may not have noticed

unless he takes the time to reflect; but should conditions at any club revert toward what once was routine, the green superintendent is made quickly aware, making it obvious that golfers are definitely cognizant of the improvement in turf grass maintenance.

There is still a real difference between clubs in Wisconsin in terms of turf quality even though everyone has gotten better. This will probably always be so given differing resources of the different clubs, but "know how" can often make up a lot of the ground in disparity between two club's green budgets, and I would hope that the increasing knowledge of what works best will be more widely appreciated so that that all of our courses can be in near tournament condition most of the time. Obviously we need to learn still more about keeping poa healthy, or develop a better means of replacing it than currently exists. Better pesticides and fungicides will appear, and they are always needed. Oil will probably be short again sometime, and we need equipment that will utilize other fuels or energy sources cheaply. Most importantly, we need continued and enhanced education of our superintendents as new techniques become available. The Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association is already putting great effort into this with good success, and this must always be encouraged.

To conclude, I think golf in Wisconsin in the eighties is better than in the sixties; we players recognize it but have become used to expecting more. This will not lessen the load of the green superintendent, but as knowledge advances and becomes widely disseminated, we will continue to make the same forward strides in the future as we have in the past.

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