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# Quality Fairways: Evolution or Revolution? Providing the Best Possible or One-Upmanship?

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By Jerry Kershasky

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Any way you look at it, fairways have been improving tremendously over the past 10 years. In some cases, you could consider them now equal to some of the greens of 25 years ago. But how we arrived at such quality seems to bother some people in our profession. They fear that we are using machinery and practices on fairways that were designed and meant for greens. Some feel it is wrong that we are able to secure the funds to carry on such intensive maintenance practices from our club members to provide better playing conditions. They fear this will lead to a vicious cycle of constant improvements over too short a time period.

I think there is some confusion here, on two points. The first is that we often say you shouldn't compare one golf course with another one down the road, but we are actually guilty of it. Secondly, our goal always should be to improve each of our programs in every way that we can.

What I mean by comparing golf courses is actually the failure to take into account the physical aspects (soil, terrain, vegetation, weather) of a golf course in the comparisons that are inevitably made. Yet without those major criteria, some try to compare programs and equipment being used on that course with another course which has dissimilar physical characteristics, but has the same final goal for turf conditions.

For example, a golf course very close to Westmoor has excellent and for the most part consistent soil conditions. That course drains very well and subsequently is open before we are every Spring. Also, it can be open long before we are after a heavy rain because of this soil drainage factor. That same course has fantastic fairways which are primarily made up of bentgrass, which it has had for over 20 years. And it has used tractor-drawn pull gangs until only very recently to maintain those excellent fairways. Their pull gangs really did not seem to hurt the bentgrass, nor did the returning of clippings to the surface of the fairways. Also, until only a

couple of years ago, that course had a manual quick coupler irrigation system, yet still had excellent bentgrass playing conditions.

If I copied the procedures and programs of my close colleague and neighbor, and used those methods on Westmoor to maintain our bentgrass fairways, we would fail. Why? Because our soils, yes, that's "soils" and not "soil", vary considerably from fairway to fairway, and for that matter can differ significantly from one side of an irrigation head to the other. They are primarily clay loam, but in areas are clay. We know that for bentgrass to survive and compete favorably with *Poa annua* it has to have superior aeration, less compaction, proper amounts of water and even distribution of it. These factors become more important if soil conditions are not uniform.

OK, maybe you're now saying, "Jerry, you missed the boat. You should not be even trying to grow bentgrass in those conditions because the practices you are going to have to implement to make bentgrass prosper are far too expensive in the short and long term. You should have informed your board of directors that you could not have the same turf conditions that your neighbor has because your soil conditions would make it too expensive to maintain."

That is the second point. We are paid to find solutions to problems, even if they are unusual or expensive. We, of course, need to present the cost of both short and long term programs, but when all facts and figures are in, it's the board's or owner's decision to proceed or to ignore your recommendations.

This is what has taken place at Westmoor. Our Green Committee, some eight years ago, wanted to have firmer and drier fairways. They wanted the fairways cut between  $\frac{1}{2}$ " and  $\frac{7}{16}$ "; they wanted the turf to be green and survive the summer stress without daytime syringing. They wanted consistent soil firmness throughout the fairway and they did not want one spot wetter than another. They wanted to eliminate the taller grass that grew in the undulations in our fairways. Regardless of which

direction we mowed with our gang mowers, they tended to bridge over any undulations, leaving taller unmowed grass in them. And they wanted this all done without major grading of fairways, or changing poor soil areas with better soils, or even chemically killing off all the *Poa annua* with Round-up and starting over. In short, they did not want to reconstruct or kill anything to reach their goal, which was to have fairway conditions as good as that course a few miles away.

Well, it would have been simple to say it could not be done, but we all know there is a solution out there for every problem. What must be pointed out is that we could not give our members the fairway conditions that our neighboring course has at the same price those members pay. We could give our members the same quality but with our soil conditions it was going to cost us more both in the short term (to establish) and even more importantly it would cost us more to maintain the fairways over a long term period.

Our committees chose to spend the extra money for quality. That decision meant different programs and increased equipment needs.

I'll skip the initial seeding procedure — that was explained in a previous *GRASS ROOTS* — and go right to our present maintenance practices. First, we mow with triplex greens mowers. Just last Fall we purchased our first lightweight small-headed five-gang hydraulic unit. We use these light units to reduce the compaction factor on our heavy soils and have found they will get down and mow the grass in the bottom of our small fairway undulations. The side benefit we get from this is that they do a superior job of cutting. The negative is that they are expensive to maintain. But if we want bentgrass fairways, they are presently the only mowers that will help us reach that goal.

Bentgrass also needs good aeration, and that means you need a machine that will penetrate deep into the ground and have a short space between holes with minimal disturbance to the surrounding surface. The more and the

deeper the holes per square foot, the better the chance bentgrass has of prospering on our soils. This of course means coring our fairways with a greens-type aerifier — presently our best choice. It is both time consuming and expensive, but results have proven it is also very successful.

Probably the most crucial job we have is applying water to turf. If done improperly over a period of time we can destroy the soil structure, rob the soil of oxygen, create such things as the black layer, germinate a lot of *Poa annua* seed, create some nice environments for disease, and cause unplayable or unsatisfactory conditions for our golfers. On the other extreme we can cause problems with drought and the loss of turf. What does this irrigation thing mean at our location? Well you cannot just turn on each fairway head for the same period of time because of the varied soil conditions. Also because we have different soils that may surround particular heads we must run those heads only for a period of time to get the fine textured soil moist. If we run it to get the coarser textured soils moist, the finer soils will be saturated. So after a light watering for the fine soils, we must come back

the following morning and hand water those coarser soil areas to get adequate water to them. We have a mapping system that identifies those areas so our hand water people can locate them with a soil probe in short order and water only them and not get excess water on the finer soils. Of course each evening when we plan to irrigate we must go out and probe the fairways to determine how much water they will need and which spots we will need to hand water the next morning. This is very labor intensive. But if you want bentgrass and consistent soil moisture so that no matter where a golfer hits the ball on the fairway it is relatively the same, at our location this practice will have to be carried on until a better method is found.

This program may mean nothing at all to a manager who has bluegrass, *Poa annua* or rye fairways. It should mean little to a manager who has consistent soil conditions from fairway to fairway. It really has little merit to anyone unless that person has conditions similar to those we have. It also means that it is going to cost my friend, whose course is only a few miles away and has consistent soil conditions, a lot less to maintain his bentgrass fairways than

it will cost me to maintain mine, but quality bentgrass is what my membership wants.

This is not one-upmanship. Rather, it is providing quality conditions at a particular site which has some drawbacks which can be overcome with some extraordinary practices. These practices may not have to be considered at golf courses without these conditions. These are management decisions, decisions we must make as competent managers. You do not have to mow with triplex mowers or aerify with greens aerifiers if fairway conditions do not dictate it for success.

I think this answers the first point I made. The second deals with success and progress. Success is what we are all shooting for; it's the bottom line. So let us not squelch new ideas and new methods. Instead, let's keep experimenting. For indeed, progress is our most important product. Many inventors, tinkers and dreamers have been ridiculed and laughed at over time for trying new things. But if they would have quit, we would be reading by candlelight, getting our communications by Pony Express, and riding to Texas instead of flying.

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