

"TO COVER OR NOT TO COVER": That Is The Question For This Fall

By Monroe S. Miller

More and more, as you travel the highways and byways of Wisconsin in the late fall and early spring when there is little or no snow, you see putting greens covered with fabric blankets. Protective covers are in vogue as a management tool for golf course superintendents in the northern climes.

The scenes of covered greens at other golf courses have generated a lot of questions from my members about them. Usually, they ask something like this: "What are those things on the greens at the Country Club of Wisconsin?" That question is usually followed with something like: "Why aren't you doing that?"

Fair question — easy answer. I have been covering greens for 18 years now. It's just a question of **what** I've been covering them with.

With the exception of a couple of years when snow came before Thanksgiving and stayed, the last major task of the season is applying a heavy topdressing (about 0.25" thick) to our putting greens.

It's a lot of work and takes a fair amount of time and a substantial quantity of topdressing material. But the results are excellent. Here's why I've continued it for so long:

1. It provides excellent protection from wind desiccation.
2. It results in better green-up in the spring.
3. It's a "free" topdressing of sorts. It doesn't interfere with play; it doesn't damage reels like playing season applications can.
4. It doesn't have any negative effects on a snowmold control program, in my experience.
5. It forces a hand brooming of the putting greens in the spring. This methodical, low technology "procedure" is the ultimate in smoothing the surface and filling in subtle low spots.

The only downsides I've observed are related to timing — preceding snowfall in late autumn while avoiding favorable play days.

Heavy rain after application hasn't mattered much, either. Some of the topdressing may get moved, but mostly if is driven into the turf. This still affords protection of the crown and that is the goal of the process anyway.

In the fall of 1988 we built a new putting green. It was seeded after Labor

Day and we had a very good catch. Nevertheless, I was reluctant to take a topdresser on the new surface and purchased three rolls of Warren's Terra-shield Cover. We covered the new green at the same time we topdressed the other greens on our golf course.

In the fall of 1989 we used those fabric blankets to cover range tees we had renovated, seeded and topdressed. They were laid down and staked in mid-November. It was Easter before we felt comfortable removing them permanently and putting them away.

It was mildly aggravating to deal with those covers this spring. Warm weather came early, but was followed by many more cold days. We were forever taking covers off, putting them back (single digit temperatures at night) and stapling the perimeters. The aggravation was exacerbated by windy days. All I could think of, on those windy days when we were open for play, was what we would be doing if we had 18 greens covered.

But there was no arguing that those range tees looked good, aggravation or not. They had filled nicely, seedlings were well established and growth was accelerated. And were they ever green!

It has been obvious to me that the claims of increased temperatures under greencovers, increased root development and earlier growth are all true. Undoubtedly, frost leaves the ground earlier. The turf was protected from wind damage, almost too much so.

Despite my experiences, which have been generally favorable, I'm not sold on any wholesale use of protective greencovers. The primary reason for that reticence is that I don't see any advantages they have over a heavy topdressing. And I can see some disadvantages. Here they are:

1. **Cost.** They require a formidable investment and I don't think the investment/benefit ratio is there when compared with topdressing cover.

2. **Longevity.** Although they are reusable, none I've investigated (Terra-shield, Evergreen and Typar) claim long life. They are subject to everything from tearing to ultraviolet degradation. You are forced with replacement every three to six years.

3. **Removal problems.** I think the weather this spring exemplified this drawback. How much time is required

for a green to harden off and withstand the uncovered temperatures and conditions? That is a subjective call, one that could easily be wrong. Open the greens up during the day; come back to the golf course after dinner and cover up. Wind problems are very real with blankets that have been peeled back. There are play problems — winter rules? The tenderness of the covered turf brings concern about spring damage (as opposed to winter damage). In some cases, they have delayed opening day, or required an opening with temporary greens.

4. **Elevated expectations.** Players, constantly looking for cure-alls, may well assume that these fabric blankets have solved the winterkill problem forever. There's a dream! They do nothing for the most common cause of winter injury — ice accumulation.

5. **Disease.** At a meeting this spring I heard a colleague talk about serious snowmold problems on a covered green. I'd like to know more about this potential problem.

I believe protective greencovers do have a place in putting green management. They are certainly better than some other mulches that have been used over the years on putting greens. I do not think, however, that they are better than topdressing. Professor Nick Christians, from Iowa State University, presented a lecture at the GCSAA conference in Orlando that gave strong support to the topdressing procedures as a part of winter management, support based on four years of research results at ISU.

In some cases, covers may be an adjunct to late fall topdressing. I could see using them selectively on high, dry and exposed greens or on greens that have a history of wintertime damage.

The thing missing in the decision making equation, to me, is research. I'd like to see some of the claims about synthetic greencovers "quantified". I'd also like to read more about the experiences of Wisconsin golf course superintendents who have used covers.

One thing is certain: the question(s) about protective greencovers will be added to the list of investigative projects for the NOER CENTER. There's no end to the work to be done at that facility.