



## How I Spent My Summer Vacation

By Ken Flisek, Golf Course Superintendent  
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*EDITOR'S NOTE: It only took me one phone call to obtain permission to reprint this article. Its author, Ken Flisek, is the golf course superintendent at The Club at Nevillewood near Pittsburgh and he is the editor of THREE RIVERS GREEN, published by the Greater Pittsburgh Golf Course Superintendents Association. Ken had the kind of summer in western Pennsylvania that most of us had all over Wisconsin. It makes for some fun reading in the dead of winter and adds credence to the old saw, "misery likes company!"*

*Ken is a Penn State grad and has been a golf course superintendent in Maine and New York State, both before moving back home to Pennsylvania. He also spent some time in northern lower Michigan, near Traverse City. As the crow flies, he wasn't that far from our Door County.*

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For the past month I have occasionally had these reoccurring dreams, maybe nightmares, about the summer that just ended. Some of these dreams may have really happened, but I am not entirely certain of that. The reason for this indecision is that, for me, this summer was just a blur.

Friends and relatives keep asking me, "what was the summer like?" for those of us who maintain golf courses for a living. My answer is that I was a better golf course superintendent than either a father or a husband, but that doesn't say much. I know my family will agree, and can only hope that the members at Nevillewood feel the same way.

Back to the question, "what was this summer like?" Let me share some of my thoughts about this summer, and let me know if any of this sounds familiar.

### THE SPRING

I don't know why it is, but it seems like every year I have more and more projects scheduled. With all of the things we have done over the past few years, how can there be this much more left to do? A cartpath project was started because one of our homeowners wanted a little better view from his patio. That meant lowering the old path four feet, tying in the new elevations to the areas around the left side of the green, and moving 500 feet of the irrigation mainline away from another homeowner's property to prevent any future problems. Fortunately, this was all done at their expense.

We also built a new halfway house and needed to, among other things, install an 1,100 foot sewer line across the course. And since this project was underfunded from the outset, we had to absorb the cost of all the plant material, sod, and irrigation supplies within my operating budget. Of course, on top of that, our crew had to do all the work. And does it surprise you to hear that the deadline for this project was the day before the Men's Invitational in mid-June?

Fortunately, both of these projects turned out very well. I hope we didn't make it look so easy that we will be asked to do even more work with even less time and money next year. Has that ever happened to you?

### THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Let me backtrack for just one minute. One of the things I do remember from the spring was that I told a few of my key employees that I did not want to mow our bentgrass greens below 9/64ths of an inch at any time this summer. We always have a few problem greens once we start cutting too short, and I was determined not to make the same mistake. This year.

Well, right before our Invitational, the greens were looking perfect, were rolling perfectly smooth and true, and had great color and density. So what do you think I decided to do? Well, I wanted to see if they could look that good and roll just

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a little bit faster. So naturally, I decided to lower the height of cut. I figured this would be just for this important event, so I really didn't hesitate too much in going down to 1/8th of an inch for a few weeks before the heat of the summer.

Before our members got used to that little bit of extra speed, I did the prudent thing. At my next green committee meeting I explained all of the downsides of having fast greens. You know all the problems: more pesticide applications, greater likelihood of *Poa annua* encroachment, greater possibility of losing turf during a stressful summer, etc. I told them that the greens were rolling a little over 11 feet on the stimpmeter during the Invitational, but that I could not maintain that speed for an entire summer. I told them the risk could be greater than the reward. They were surprised to hear that the Senior PGA Tour plays on greens that roll about 9'6". I asked how many people thought they were better putters than Raymond Floyd and Dave Stockton. I have always thought that a smooth and true putting surface, consistent from green to green, was better than lightning fast putting surfaces where calling them greens would be a misnomer. Don't get me wrong, I like fast greens, especially if I don't have to maintain them. But I do not see all the fun in worrying about watching a downhill three-footer turn into a ten footer coming back. To me, golf is hard enough without that.

Well, to my delight, my instructions from the committee were to keep the greens as fast as I could, without jeopardizing the health of the greens. I was actually a little bit surprised by this logical decision, but maybe I shouldn't have been. I later talked to a few other superintendents who were told the same things by their members at about the same time of the year. All of this leads me to the conclusion that I have suspected all along. Superintendents are their own worst enemy. We are always trying to stretch that window just a little bit farther. It must be some type of macho thing to see who can have the fastest greens, even though we are the ones who should know better. I wonder if it is really worth the added expense and aggravation?

#### THE HEAT

If there was ever a summer to want to be growing bentgrass instead of *Poa annua*, this was it. And it was equally important to have USGA greens instead of old push-up style native soil greens. My greens handled the heat of July in remarkable fashion. I think I actually found a system that worked pretty well. We had assigned holes for three of my employees. Their job was to mow every morning, then spend all afternoon water their six holes. They watered anything that needed it—greens, tees, bunker faces or whatever. Again, with bent and its deeper root system, we did not need to water every green every day. By having the same person do the same hole everyday, they got to know exactly what needed water almost without even looking. And by keeping things on the dry side, we didn't see very much disease pressure.

Don't get me wrong; we did not make it through the summer without our share of problems. At the end of July, a couple of my shady greens started to thin out, just at about the same time that the irrigation controllers for these greens started to act up. It only took a few days without water to really stress them. In fact, after taking a day off at the end of July, I rode around the course as soon as I got to work on Monday morning. The refreshing feeling of having slept in the day before was replaced by a sudden surge of panic when I came to the 5th green. From the cartpath, it looked

like the whole green was dead. Upon closer inspection, I found that only about half the green was dead and the other half could withstand at least another few hours without water before it could be pronounced dead.

I had planned to quadra-tine aerify the green on this morning because it had already been thinning and the roots were dangerously close to non-existent. But under this much stress, and with the temperatures were experiencing, I didn't know if that would help or hurt. I decided to quadra-tine anyway, and we even put down a granular fertilizer for the first time in two months. I figured the combination would either help or just put the turf out of its misery and allow me to start over. We also started to do all the things that we should have been doing all along. We raised the height of cut, skipped a couple of mowings a week at the beginning of August, and the green started to recover.

#### THE END IS NEAR, OR IS IT?

Unfortunately I am somewhat of a workaholic. By the beginning of August every year I start to get a serious case of burnout. It gets to be a real effort to get out of bed in the morning, and almost as soon as I get home from work, I fall asleep on the couch. Fortunately, my wife and kids know that this is only temporary and by fall I will actually begin to talk to them again.

I remember having a week of cool weather at the beginning of August. I felt so certain that the worst part of the summer was behind us that I fertilized the fairways. They had needed it for a few weeks, and I wanted to get the bentgrass growing real well again before the *Poa annua* had a chance to recover from the heat. We had been getting an increasing amount of *Poa annua* in our fairways for the past years, but this year helped to reverse that trend.

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Well, wouldn't you know that as soon as I fertilized, the temperature soared over 90 degrees again, and the humidity was just unbearable. We then had a two-inch storm, making it impossible to mow for a few days. By the end of the weekend we had pythium on several tees and a few fairways. A couple of days later we had pythium, brown patch and wilt on the same fairway on the same day! I knew right then that the rest of the month was going to be a battle, and suddenly a rush of adrenaline started to replace the fatigue that I had been feeling.

In some warped kind of way it was thrilling to come to work every morning knowing that I would have to make some difficult decisions, and the life of the turf was hanging in the balance. Did I want the turf to die from pythium or drought stress? Should I water, or mow, or spray? Would mowing spread the disease, or would having less leaf surface reduce the humidity and help prevent the spread of disease?

For the record, the granular fertilizer application did help the fairways. At least it helped the parts of the fairways that didn't get fertilizer burn. It seems as though I forgot that after this type of summer, one week of cool weather wasn't going to cure all of our ills. I think next year I'll wait a little bit longer before I push the bent in the fairways again. Hopefully, at that time next year I'll be more rested and able to think more clearly.

#### THE DROUGHT

After all the disease pressure we had the first half of August, I was hoping for a few days of clear skies. Little did

I know that, as if the summer hadn't already been cruel enough, next we would go through over four weeks without a drop of rain. Again, I was happy to be growing bentgrass and lucky enough to have a great irrigation system. They were both put to the test this year. The hotter it got, the better the bentgrass looked. If I wouldn't have had to buy irrigation water, I would have wanted the heat for another month.

We fill our irrigation lake with domestic water when the stormwater runoff isn't sufficient to recharge the lake. After being about \$15,000 over budget for pesticides in August, I decided not to buy any more water than was absolutely necessary during the rest of the season. This sounded like a good idea until my assistant called me at home one morning to tell me that the irrigation pumps shut down because the pond was empty. Of course this happened on a Friday, and the forecast called for 90 degree temperatures all weekend.

Fortunately, we have a four-inch meter that fills that pond, and we can get about 500,000 gallons per day into the lake. We spent the next two weeks calculating how much water we would use that night, and then putting only that much water into the pond. We cut it real close a few times, and as a result we know a lot more about the irrigation system and water usage than we did before the drought.

#### LOOKING BACK

Now that the summer is over, it is time to think about what I did right and what went wrong this year, too. Everyone makes mistakes, but the key is to always learn from those mistakes. I just hope, that over the winter, I don't forget everything I learned this summer. ♣

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