

No-Way Ray... *Poa annua* Control

USGA

By Bob Vavrek, USGA Agronomist, North Central Region

Growing conditions have been everything but consistent across the North Central Region this spring. Cool wet conditions continue to persist well into June in the Dakotas and Montana. In contrast, the cool spring weather suddenly changed to extended periods of hot, humid, droughty weather across Michigan and Wisconsin just after Memorial Day. Roughs are burning up and greens are wilting in Detroit and Milwaukee, while I have been scraping frost from car windows and wearing layers of fleece, gloves, and raingear during TAS visits in Montana.

Winterkill always affects golf turf somewhere in the Region each year. This spring a number of courses in the Detroit area entered the season with considerable injury to *Poa annua* on greens. More severe and more widespread winterkill occurred across Montana and Eastern North Dakota.

Many superintendents believe the most severe injury occurred around December. Unusually warm weather during fall extended the golf season into late November and early December on many courses. The turf never seemed to have the opportunity to harden-off before the first frigid blast of weather hit the open golf courses in late December. It was very easy to determine the exact percentage of *Poa annua* that existed in greens last year by calculating the ratio of brown to green turf this spring.

Cool cloudy weather certainly didn't help the rate of turf recovery during April and May, even at courses where superintendent managed to convince golfers to play temporary greens. Experienced superintendents generally agree that playing a severely thinned-out green will significantly prolong the recovery period. I try my best to convince golfers that playing an overseeded green will just about guarantee an agonizingly slow recovery, but my plea for sanity typically falls on deaf ears.

Most courses, however, entered the season in excellent condition. Some superintendents say the quality of turf during April, particularly putting surfaces, has never been better during the past 20 years, or so. On the down side, other superintendents have noticed more *Poa annua* in greens this spring, perhaps due to the mild winter. No winter stress means that nearly all the *Poa* that germinated in the putting surface last fall developed into dime to quarter sized colonies. The common complaint from golfers this spring: bumpy greens, a concern not limited to the

North Central Region according to the other USGA Agronomists in the Northeast Region.

Many greens were indeed bumpy, as they usually are in April and early May. *Poa annua*, especially the small dense colonies that germinated and developed last fall, tend to grow much faster during the spring compared to bentgrass. Perhaps the early start to the season last year and a week or so of warm April weather this year have conditioned golfers into believing that putting surfaces should peak at Memorial Day, instead of the 4th of July. In any event, I hope it doesn't take a widespread event of winterkill to acquaint golfers with the normal time line of turf growth and development for the northern tier of states.

A surprising number of superintendents still make a serious effort to reduce or eradicate *Poa annua* from greens each season. I've seen greens religiously spiked/overseeded with G-whatever or A-whatever

Porter-Achtenhagen
Seasonal Services Ltd.

Fairway Aerification

We use the

- CUSHMAN GA-60 AERATOR
- CUSHMAN TURF TRUCK

- Our clients are Extremely Pleased with the superior hole quality this unit produces!
- Daytime and Evening Service
- Serving Wisconsin and Northern Illinois
- References are Available

(414) 392-3444

- Two GA-60's are used for more Efficient Service

bentgrass and routinely doused with TGR until the putting surface during spring resembles a leopard's coat. More is better, if the turf is not responding to the growth regulator, then apply a higher rate. I wonder if the *Poa* can be enhanced to the point where it is more susceptible to winterkill, but, to quote Stan Zontek, "I digress." Some dabble with materials, such as Prograss, which are not labeled for greens. More than one person has considered and even a few "cutting-edge" types may have tried ultra-low rates of Roundup on greens for selective control of *Poa*.

Sometimes all these intense efforts are rewarded and they actually reduce the percentage of *Poa* in a few greens...well for a while anyway. The miracle conversion usually lasts just long enough for the superintendent to write up the program in a trade journal. The turn around may even continue for another season. Sooner or later, we experience another cool, wet fall, then a mild winter, and then...you guessed it, the *Poa annua* returns into the putting surfaces with a vengeance and you are back to square one.

Poa annua thrives in a green for a reason. It may be compaction, poor drainage, shade, poor air circulation, poor bentgrass management, or simply natural overseeding pressure from seed being constantly tracked onto the putting surface from the fairways

and roughs. Try to force more bentgrass to grow in a poorly drained, shaded site and even if you temporarily succeed, the quality of the turf and the playing surface will be unacceptable. You could rebuild greens, remove trees, mow at a reasonable height of cut, and become very stingy with the irrigation to improve growing conditions for bentgrass, but how would you stop *Poa annua* from being tracked onto the greens and germinating in an unrepaired ball mark? You can tip the scales in favor of bentgrass in favorable sites with sound management techniques, but if you are looking for a silver bullet to convert *Poa* to bent on that small, poorly drained green cut into a dense stand of evergreens -- forget about it!

Sometimes you just have to play the hand you're dealt, even if it means *Poa* greens. It's ironic that the same people who try every trick in the book to eliminate *Poa* are the same people who pay homage to the goddess of *Poa* each spring after a bout with winterkill. The phone rings... "Hey Bob, how long before that good ol' *Poa* fills into the thin and bare areas on my greens? I really miss those little seedheads this spring. Is there anything I can do to help it along, could I spoon feed with liquid Phosphorus, could I harvest seed from fairways, could I.....?" 🌿

1999

Wisconsin Turfgrass Association

Summer Field Day

Tuesday, August 10

O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility, Verona

*Watch your mail for details or
call Audra Anderson at 608-845-6536*