

# Heavy Play, Weeds, Moss, and Dead *Poa* - What Next?



By **Bob Vavrek**, Agronomist, USGA Green Section, North-Central Region

Maintaining consistent playing conditions throughout the 1998 season was definitely a challenge for many superintendents across the Region. The year began quietly when warm weather arrived ahead of schedule and provided some enjoyable early season rounds for golfers. There was surprisingly little winterkill to repair and many courses were green and playable by early May. April and May cart revenue was up at many private clubs and the daily fee courses were treated to a considerable amount of springtime cash flow. Life was good - or was it?

Unfortunately, the floodgates that hold back golfers in spring were opened before many superintendents had a chance to properly clean up and prepare the course for play. The full complement of seasonal help was still weeks away and there was little time for training the new employees as they trickled into the maintenance facility. That is, if any summer help arrived at all, because the pool of seasonal help had all but dried up in most locations where unemployment rates were extremely low. A number of courses were short a few temporary employees all

summer due to the dwindling pool of seasonal help.

Although turf had greened up on many courses, it was not yet growing vigorously and the playing surfaces were not able to rapidly recover from concentrated cart/foot traffic. Consequently, a bumper crop of clover, dandelions, chickweed, and other weeds became well established on the course before summer. Weed control was discussed on nearly every Turf Advisory Service (TAS) visit last summer. The most weed-free courses were those that made an extra effort to eliminate

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weeds from the playing surfaces during the previous fall.

To make matters worse, golfers who play plenty of golf during April and May generally expected 4th of July conditions by Memorial Day. Unreasonable expectations made for one long, busy season.

Quite a few superintendents experimented with Embark applications on one or two fairways and had excellent results. It seems the timing and the weather following the treatments was just about perfect, which provided equally perfect results. Word spreads quickly and there will undoubtedly be many more acres of fairways treated with Embark this spring.

In my opinion, if Embark treatments were foolproof, then everyone would be controlling *Poa annua* seedheads on fairways each spring. Most older, successful superintendents realize through experience that an Embark treatment is a hit or miss endeavor, highly dependent on timing the application just right and not without the risk of discoloring or injuring the turf. Furthermore, the success regarding seedhead suppression on fairways will no doubt encourage the use of Embark on *Poa annua*/bentgrass greens, where a heavy crop of seedheads can affect the quality of a putting surface. There is nothing quite like the look of a burnt orange *Poa* green that was treated with Embark during early spring and then hit with a few heavy frosts a day or two later. The several week period before recovery occurs usually feels like several months to the superintendent when the hottest topic in the grill room is whether or not the greens will ever be green again.

Whether or not the heavy early season play had any influence on the invasion of moss into greens across the Region is debatable. Over the past two seasons the courses that always had a little

moss in greens are finding that the moss has spread and many courses that have never had this concern are now seriously affected by moss encroachment.

I felt more like a "psychic friend" than an agronomist this past summer at several TAS visits to courses I had never seen before. We typically discuss the day-to-day maintenance practices before touring the course.

**Q. What is the mid-season height of cut?**

**A.** About 0.120 from late May through September. We really raise the height of cut way up to 0.130, after our last major outing in early November, the Frostbite Open.

**Q. Groomers on the mowers?**

**A.** On one set of triplexes, rotated on and off a particular green every other day.

**Q. How deep are the groomers set?**

**A.** Set just deep enough to tickle the turf, you know, about a dime or a nickel below the bench setting. It really cleans up those *Poa* seedheads, eliminates the grain, and dethatches the green. What a great management tool, no need to set up the verticut reel anymore.

Been brushing the greens more too, it really stands up the turf and helps manage green speed.

**Q. Do any rolling?**

**A.** On Men's Day and on the weekend, but sometimes three times a week.

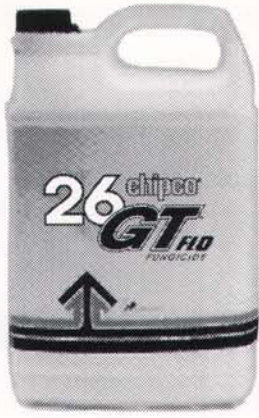
**Q. How much play?**

**A.** About 30,000+ rounds a year, seven to eight minutes between tee times, and there are always a few early-bird members that they allow out on the course as soon as it's light.

**Q. Any policy regarding green speed?**

**A.** There wasn't until two years ago when the incoming club president appointed my new Green Committee Chairman. What a player, he can really turn it up a notch or two after a press on the back nine. Pretty knowledgeable too, he has played many of the Top 100 courses in Golf Digest and is a member at several of the nearby new courses as well. It runs in the family, his daughter was just awarded a full golf scholarship to Stanford. First thing he did was appoint the current Men's and Women's Club Champs to the Green Committee. Anyway, we have initiated a policy of keeping

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greens about 10', especially on days when members may be having guests playing. We used to keep the greens about 9' to 9'6" all year, but a few of the better players wrote a letter to the Board saying that some of the greens just don't feel like they roll 9'6" - maybe because the front nine greens are so flat. Well, we sure addressed that problem when we designed and built the back nine, but that's another story.

**Q. Any shade problems on greens?**

**A.** The greens get plenty of sunlight, except for three holes on the original front nine and the eight holes on the new back nine that the members designed and pitched in to build about twenty years ago. The back nine really has some character; it was cut right through a wooded swamp - spectacular in fall when the leaves change color. The pace of play also improves in the summer because you can't take too many practice swings with all those mosquitoes.

**Q. What is a typical irrigation cycle in summer?**

**A.** Averages about 15 minutes a night or so, depending on whether or not it rains. All the sprinklers around greens go on or off as a block.

**Q. How many pounds of nitrogen would you say you apply to greens each season?**

**A.** About 1.5 to 2.0 pounds a year. An old soil test indicated we had plenty of phosphorus in the greens so we haven't applied any for 12 years. Well, it doesn't move through the soil profile and there really isn't any need to encourage *Poa annua* in the greens.

Considering the answers to these questions, I usually ask to visit the greens that have the most moss encroachment first, when we tour the course. Eyes open wide, jaws drop, and suddenly I'm a psychic who can predict moss on a green at a course I have never seen before. The tongue-in-cheek answers to putting surface maintenance questions, however, allude

to the underlying causes to moss encroachment, which is overly intense management of a green. The bottom line is that moss cannot compete with a healthy, vigorously growing stand of turf and it has no problem becoming well established in a weak, thin green.

As the long season dragged on, many areas were subjected to extended periods of drought. Drought put extra stress on *Poa annua* playing surfaces and severe losses of turf occurred after several bouts with severe thunderstorms inundated previously dry courses with several inches of rain. High winds associated with lines of thunderstorms also cause extensive damage to trees on many courses during the summer. Acres of *Poa annua* turf on fairways died or were severely injured after a few days of heavy rainfall during August. Preventative fungicide applications and grub control did little to prevent the loss of *Poa annua* last summer, which took superintendents and golfers by surprise. Scalping the turf after the heavy rain probably contributed to the injury. Golfers grumbled about poor fairway conditions well into October and were typically unwilling to accept that the injury was weather related and beyond the superintendent's control.

Atypical weather persisted well into fall. A warm November and early December had many superintendents second-guessing themselves regarding the use of covers on greens. Covers encouraged turf growth on greens at some courses until late December. Some superintendents removed covers, mowed the greens, and then reapplied snow mold fungicides, while others did nothing. The implications of delaying the normal hardening off process by covering turf will not be known until this spring.

What will the last season of the millennium hold for your course? Only time will tell. ♣

