



Late Season Problems

By **Pat Norton**, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

Every week of every golf season for about twenty years now...I feel like I've been walking the line. I almost always feel like a hiker on the bluffs...one small misstep and it's over the edge I go...

The everyday, every week balance that man and Mother Nature work out on any golf course permits superintendents to walk the line without too often falling off and getting impaled or crushed on the rocks below. The work of any golf superintendent is always on display...for either private or public viewing. There are always those times when any golf course will look especially pristine...and other, more adversarial times when things look a little ragged.

Golfers especially during this very mild year...and every year...heap on the compliments when the golf course looks great. They all tend to say pretty much the same thing...and guys like me get a little jaded after awhile. We take for granted our ability to groom, manicure, and ultimately improve any golf course at which we are employed.

In my case...out here in Corn Country U.S.A....I've caused and experienced two late season problems that I am very reluctant to write about publicly. But, in the interest of needing a topic and of taking my medicine...I cleanse myself here...and hope that the advice threading through this essay will help other superintendents to avoid problems, and the doubt and anguish that they cause.

As we all know, the summer of 2004 was extremely mild all over the Midwest. Looking back on it now, it's ironic that such an idyllic summer should turn into such a bitter October. Looking back on it...I can't believe that I let it all develop into such a negative situation. And, looking back on it...I fully realize that these problems as they developed could well have led to my dismissal from my position here of ten years.

One of my all-time boneheaded decisions was to use an alternative to Merit for white grub control across our thirty-four acres of Penncross greens, tees, and fairways. A big mistake...in review.

Back in February or March, I was finalizing my fertilizer and chemical buying decisions and beginning to place them with our preferred vendors. When comparing insecticides, I found that my preferred compound would result in about a \$300 savings as compared to Merit, which I had used many times very successfully.

My rate calculation was incorrect, however, in that my turf and ornamental reference book was of 1998

vintage, and contained a labeled rate 25% below the new label rate. So, I ordered this insecticide based on the old label rate and thought that I made a good decision and saved \$300. How shortsighted! We then compounded the problem by applying this insecticide in late May/early June instead of waiting until early July...which will, by the way, be my application target for next year.

When we had grub breakthrough in late August or early September, it slowly became apparent that 2004 was going to be a bumper crop year for masked chafer grubs at Nettle Creek and lots of other south ChicagoLand and central Illinois golf courses.

Our follow up application of Dylox(seven cases) only cost us \$3,500...which compared to that paltry \$300 initial savings makes me feel like an idiot. Ah, the

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blessings of hindsight! Fortunately, mistake #1 was communicated to all other management and ownership types and everybody understood, accepted, and forgave the error.

Early in September I finally decided to do something about those pesky dandelions in our bentgrass fairways. Not that many of them, you see, but enough that an application of herbicide on a spot treatment basis seemed the answer. Not a bad strategy...especially when I usually feel that a broadcast spray over our entire 27 acres of fairway turf is a waste of material and somewhat unnecessary. In this situation, however, I tried a new herbicide, and most importantly, let Manuel out the door with a common hose nozzle due to an inoperable Lesco hand gun. Figure in the fact that hand spraying on warm September days can be a real chore...and the recipe for disaster is right there.

I do remember vividly seeing Manuel juicing it out there really strongly as I watched from on top of the hill. I also remember being very busy at that moment and moving on with my chores that morning instead of checking with him more closely. After all, he'd hand sprayed many times with many different chemicals...and never a problem.

This herbicide...combined with a too generous application rate through that general duty hose gun...and an applicator who wasn't reminded that a little bit is all that you need...gave us a textbook case of phytotoxicity over sixteen holes of this golf course! It is as ugly as it is incredible! I still ask myself how it happened!

After it became apparent that this herbicide burn was becoming a problem, I informed ownership verbally that we had a problem. I still wasn't overly concerned...as I know that turfgrass is usually pretty tough stuff and that the affected areas would begin to recover with time. I also did not take ownership out on the course, however, and let him see firsthand the extent of the burn problem. Huge mistake.



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Our marketing director...a good friend and confidant of our owner...played the course last Sunday, was negatively surprised, overreacted totally, and immediately informed our elderly owner that we had a HUGE problem out on the course. This was followed by a Monday AM inspection, a surprise phone call, and lots of angst since then. Dr. Randy Kane of the Chicago District Golf Association was called in...to my severe embarrassment...and confirmed that everything that I was prepared to do for recovery was indeed correct. He also dryly informed me that it's always best to keep club officials or ownership totally and completely informed when mistakes are made.

I freely admit to making these mistakes...otherwise you wouldn't be reading this and discovering that I am not perfect. A superintendent friend of mine observed that in dealing with such a variety of responsibilities daily...mistakes do happen.

What I do not appreciate is being backed into a corner by civilians that do not understand turfgrass...and transform themselves instantly from budget penny pinchers into money wasters because they want action taken now...today.



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What I also do not appreciate is the constant pressure to control costs and reduce expenses...which is understandable from a business viewpoint. On the other hand, it is impossible to continually provide the playing conditions that golfers and ownership expect with severely reduced expenditures on fertilizers and chemicals.

For example, planning a complete course protection program is quite a bit easier with \$75,000 instead of our current \$52,000. I do not appreciate the fact either, that the past is so easily forgotten...and fighting to educate and ultimately restore these lost funds is almost impossible. The perception is that somehow the superintendent is not a good businessman, not a good buyer, not a good horse trader.

The reality is that superintendents get too conditioned into cost control...which can force them into mistakes. I've been cutting corners for years now. Now I got burned...and quite literally burned my golf course.

It's also curious that after ten years of having this golf course always in very good agronomic condition...one instance, one mistake seriously strains the trust between owner and superintendent. I was even told that

I'd 'ruined my reputation as a superintendent'...which angered me totally. I won't wait for his apology...old, powerful people don't apologize very easily. That is one comment that I'll never forgive...or forget.

Part of the strain is indeed my fault...communication could have been better. But, the negative overreaction, lack of understanding, and the sudden lack of confidence and trust in me are very sobering and unsettling. I do not doubt my ability. I doubt that my relationship with the owner of this golf course can ever be quite the same.

Part of me wanted to resign in anger and protest. The more intelligent part of me says stay the course, continue on, and repair all damage. Fortunately for me, this is what our owners want me to do also.

Due to the advanced age of our owner, I have a pretty clear understanding of what will happen here within a few years. I will stay until the end...and be ready for what changes the future may bring.

In any case, I will continue to treat people with honor and respect. It is the least that they deserve. ♣

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