

USGA

Turf Management 2005: It's Not Getting Any Easier

By Robert Vavrek, USGA Senior Agronomist, North Central Region

To say that 2005 was among the most challenging seasons to maintain a well conditioned golf course would be an understatement. Many superintendents across the Region compare 2005 with the difficult summers experienced during 1988 and 1995. Some believe 2005 to be worse because the season started with widespread winter injury.

Old courses, where the playing surfaces are dominated by *Poa annua*, were certainly affected the most by winter kill after several particularly severe thaw/freeze events that occurred during late winter and early spring. Cool weather during April and May set back efforts to accelerate the rate of recovery despite numerous attempts at renovation. Little patience by golfers for anything but pristine playing conditions from the minute a course opened to the

day it closed did not help matters either with respect to any hopes of rapid recovery.

Unusually cool weather seemed to transition almost overnight into extended periods of high humidity and stressful temperatures between the mid-80's and mid-90's. The perplexing combination of high humidity and drought had inexperienced turf managers scratching their heads about when and how much irrigation to apply to mature healthy turf versus weak immature turf that was in various stages of recovery. As usual, too much irrigation caused more problems than too little.

However, the ability to selectively irrigate the course depends on the presence of a modern, sophisticated watering system. A considerable amount of timely hand watering is necessary to compensate for the limitations of an antiquated watering system,



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though hand watering is still important at courses where modern automatic irrigation systems exist. With operating budgets being cut or frozen over the past several years, the ability to authorize overtime to hand water turf was hampered at many courses.

The difficult time many courses had providing golfers a high quality playing surface consistently last summer should come as no surprise considering how close to the edge courses are being maintained these past few years. Golfers want faster greens, so nearly all greens at mid-to-upper end courses are maintained at or below 1/8-inch and double cut or rolled from early spring through late fall. Golfers want perfect bunkers, so a significant amount of time and labor is shifted from basic turf maintenance/conditioning to sand management. Golfers don't like the disruption associated with cultivation and topdressing, so these critical management practices are performed less frequently or abandoned altogether.

We have improved lightweight mowers, new fungicides, better cultivation/topdressing equipment and more sophisticated irrigation systems. Despite these tools, turf is still taking it on the chin during long periods of stressful weather. As mentioned above, the primary cause is the fact that we are so close to the edge regarding turf management, that just one more slight push or stress has catastrophic consequences. It's easy, but not entirely fair or correct to blame the take all patch, the basal rot anthracnose, or nematodes for midsummer losses of turf, when it was the drought stress or sand topdressing dragged in on a hot day or scalping that occurred when wet, soft turf was double cut at 0.110" that predisposed the greens to these problems. No doubt there will be reports of other diseases across the Region, such as bacterial wilt of *Poa annua*, in the near future to blame for poor turf performance.

Sounds gloomy doesn't it? A slow downward spiral with little hope on the horizon...might as well change careers. A good place to start on the road leading to some form of manageable or sustainable turf is to define some reasonable maintenance standards. This is a topic frequently discussed at Turf Advisory Service visits, because what is "reasonable" from the maintenance point of view is not always viewed as "reasonable" from the golfers' perspective. Maintenance standards should never be defined as ultimate, and often unachievable, goals.

If defining maintenance standards is too much to handle right now, communicate the need for moderation. Try to shift the golfer expectations instead of dictating radical changes. Dictate to members that the green speed must be decreased from 11-feet to 9-feet for day-to-day play and you will likely be looking for another job. On the other hand, you will have a better

chance convincing the majority of golfers that a better option is to provide fast greens during the summer and then raise the height of cut significantly during mid-September. Providing adequate time for turf to recover before winter cannot help but produce a healthier stand of turf the next season. Combine time for recovery during fall with a sound cultivation program and you may be able to keep your head above water in the future.

Any change will be difficult for some of the more unreasonable golfers to accept, but there is more chance of success with changes by trying to address golfer expectations for most of the season while setting aside some of the remaining season for maintenance. Needless to say, it will still be a challenge to convince all golfers that any change is necessary, but what are your other choices?

Weather patterns are changing and seem to be more unpredictable than ever. Our approach to golf course maintenance will need to be just as flexible and changeable as the weather. ♣

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