

USGA

Green Management a Little Too Close to the Edge

By Bob Vavrek, USGA Green Section Senior Agronomist, North Central Region

Doesn't it seem to be getting more difficult to maintain fast, firm, smooth playing surfaces on old creeping bentgrass/*Poa annua* greens every year? Why shouldn't it? Old greens have never been pushed so hard to meet the often unreasonable expectations and demands of golfers who are never quite satisfied for long regardless of how fast and firm the greens may be. If they are not fast enough, then make them faster. If they are fast enough, that's fine, but then be sure to maintain that speed from the day the course opens until the snow flies. I'm not sure what fuels the need for speed, but just watch the smug satisfaction on the face of the member who watches his guest four putt that attempt at a birdie or, better yet, blow that short downhill putt right back into the approach. Yep...these greens are finally putting just about right.

Remember the "good old days" of turf management circa 10 or 15 years ago? You didn't have to be recovering from severe winterkill to mow greens above 1/8". There really wasn't any need to talk in the language of 1000ths.

You were either at 1/8" or 9/64" for a few days or a week before a special event or else you were mowing around 5/32" for day to day play. It wasn't unheard of to raise the height of cut to 3/16" after the middle of September just to give the turf time to recover and store carbohydrates before winter.

The grass on the old greens hasn't changed much over the past 15 years or so, and if it has, it's only become worse. Low mowing heights, more water, and more fungicides have more than likely increased the percentage of *Poa annua*; unless of course, you have deluded yourself into thinking that throwing some A-4 or Providence into the cultivation holes once or twice during your career has magically transformed the old Washington bentgrass into a spanking brand new kind of turf. Then again I'm assuming there are still holes in the greens and golfers haven't badgered you into substituting deep tine and quadratine aeration for the time-tested practice of removing 1/2" to 5/8" cores from the putting surfaces twice a season.



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Are the losses of turf on old greens that occur with more regularity these days just unavoidable side effects of global warming, or are we pushing the greens to the point where it takes very little additional stress to cause extensive injury. I don't recall discussing treatments for fairy rings, take-all patch, basal rot anthracnose, nematodes, annual winterkill events and annual midsummer heat stress injury all that much, if at all, in my initial Turf Advisory Service visit reports of the early 90's. Perhaps these problems were there all along, but misdiagnosed, but I don't think so.

I believe we are simply pushing old greens too far...heights of cut at or below 1/10" from early in spring until a week or so before snow mold fungicides are applied, double cutting and/or rolling 5 - 7 times a week, and sole reliance on a starvation diet of liquid fertilizer. A Scott's spinner spreader of sand once in a while and perhaps a mid-March deep tine operation can be done to manage thatch as long as it doesn't interfere with play.

Unorthodox use of plant growth regulators and herbicides are an issue as well. First, there's three applications of Primo/Proxy just to take care of the seedheads, then I'll kick the *Poa* in the butt with a shot of Trimmit just before it gets hot, now that it's been threatened, my Primo/Cutless treatment will confuse the *Poa* to the point

where my "experimental" application of Velocity (made when no one's looking) can finally clean it out of the greens. Funny how the final result looks very much like the severe winterkill that occurred last year and kept you awake at night all spring wondering if you would keep your job. Fortunately, I was exaggerating wildly...or was I?

The greens are that old pick up that still gets you to and from work and can even manage high speed for short trips once in a while. Take that truck on a sustained high speed cross country trip and it will certainly break down. Skip the oil changes (regular top-dressing and hollow tine cultivation) and the breakdowns will be worse and occur sooner.

Is there an answer? Well, it's not likely that golfers are going to become more reasonable any time soon. One option that needs to be considered is regrassing the greens with an improved cultivar of bentgrass. This has been accomplished with good success at nearly 20 courses in the Chicago area, yet not one course in Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul, or Milwaukee has attempted to fumigate and regrass the putting surfaces. It will only take one or two regrassing success stories in any of these cities to become an acceptable alternative to managing old greens. How, When, How Much? Good questions and perhaps a good topic for a future Grass Roots article. ♣



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