



# Ideas That Evolve Into Practices

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

How many new ideas are superintendents bombarded with... seemingly every week? How often are new ideas suggested by a sales rep? Presented at a seminar? Ideas are constantly being thrown about in conversation...or passed across the desk during a sales call...as the mail is sliced open...or discussed over the phone.

My personal favorites are the ideas that are chipped into the pot from fellow employees or members...with their two cents worth concerning their ideas for the golf course. "Oh swell. A new tee...where? Revisions to the mounding left of no. 7 fairway...how big? And for how much?"

Or...another favorite...the idea of 'bugs in a jug.' The beneficial bacteria in this series of applications are supposed to enhance and complement the naturally occurring, millions and billions of already present, free bacteria now occupying every square inch of the soils of this golf course... "The beneficial bacteria in that gallon jug are supposed to do what to my ponds??? For how long??? At what price??? Over what surface area? Supported by whose research?"

Other ideas are simply mandated by an owner at a weekly meeting...which either means that there is no choice...simply get it done...or try to become an instant

attorney and argue the case against that seemingly innocent idea.

The bombardment of ideas is never ending...and neither is the process of deciding which is a valid idea and which is not. It all becomes a process of filtering through the ideas like a net skimming the debris from the surface of a pool. I sometimes feel like a traffic cop deciding on the ultimate fate of ideas. Other times I feel like a bouncer at a bar...good ideas get into the club...while rotten ideas get bounced into the wastebasket...and dumpsterized with the rest of the garbage!

Any good golf manager is well seasoned when it comes to sifting

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through ideas. A skilled golf manager is usually seasoned and roasted to the point of toughness...which is a job requirement these days as the bombardment of new, fresh turf ideas continues its onslaught...

It sometimes makes me feel as though I am running around with a shield emblazoned with our club logo...defending the homeland that is our golf course...while Excalibur in my other hand slashes and destroys all of those bad ideas hurled at us across the blood soaked fairway battlefields of northern Illinois. The good ideas, of course, are spared a bloody death...cleaned up...and admitted into the maintenance hall of honor for an audience with the superintendent king/queen.

I will admit that there are a few ideas that I viewed with skepticism for quite a long time that have now soaked their way into the consciousness of this golf course and have evolved into standard operating practice. The really bright superintendents probably adopted these simple measures long ago, but I am sort like that opossum that cannot quite figure out that headlight/nighttime/oncoming car thing...and keeps getting squashed out on the road.

About five hundred years ago...or maybe five years ago...I was approached by a golfer/ag fertilizer dealer concerning the idea of spraying liquid slow release on our bent grass areas as the exclusive means of providing nitrogen to the turfgrass. He maintained that many of his lawn care dealers were doing the same thing with great success and for a very low, low, low cost. I had always taken the view that liquid fertilizer was a good accessory for specialty use...but could never replace organic blend, slow release N products as the fertilizer of choice for bent.

After repeated sales calls...this

fert dealer obviously thought that I was an absolute idiot...and that nothing could dent that tough, thick, seasoned shell known as the male human skull. And I, by the way, did feel totally smug and proud that I was able to fend off and resist yet another 'idea assault' and had maintained the integrity of my reputation...*as a guy with a skull thick enough to repel pretty much all incoming ideas.*

Life went on...as did the seasons at beautiful Thick Skull CC. As with all ag/turf inputs, fertilizer started to compare in price to precious gold. Nitrogen started to reappear in the precious metals section of the Periodic Table of the

Elements. Sulfate of potash became a family heirloom and began to show up in safety deposit boxes at banks everywhere. Fertilizer prices kept climbing skyward as farmers worldwide responded to the audacity of people everywhere demanding to be fed. They obviously do not know just how important golf really is...but, I digress.

One day I noticed a familiar voice and face playing the 19th hole here at NCCC. I hadn't seen Garret for about two, or maybe two hundred, years. He had just finished golfing here at Thick Skull...was enjoying himself thoroughly having a brew...and in I

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walked. He asked me to lower my shield and sheath my sword...which I gladly did due to the heat, the humidity, and the hour of the day. After buying me about fifteen beers, he eventually asked if I would ever reconsider liquid fertilization. I responded that I had been reconsidering it all for the past 24 months...could think of nothing else...and was ready to let the idea of liquid fertilization evolve into practice.

Even though I was ready...after all of those months...to accept liquid nitrogen fertilization from an ag dealer...my dry fert *turf sales* rep...was not. He obviously thought, and still feels, that a 50% slow release liquid 20-3-5 containing 4% Fe(1500 gal bulk delivery @ \$4.10/gallon) could never be the basis for nutrition of Penncross tees, greens, and fairways. At the time, I somewhat agreed with him. Fifteen hundred gallons is quite a bit of material to dispose of should it have a propensity to be phytotoxic to bentgrass. And although reasonably priced, the total cost shot past \$6000...enough to prohibit duplicate purchasing of dry material.

But, it was one of those ideas that kept evolving itself over time...trying to figure out the best method of penetration. Once adopted...this idea has proven itself to be a total success. There is absolutely no phytotoxicity, is economical, and results in fabulous looking bentgrass. This liquid fertilizer has become the basis for every tank mix that we spray...whether used by itself, or tank mixed with fungicides, herbicides, growth regulators, or wetting agents. It is the only fertilizer source used over the past two seasons on 33.5 acres of bent fairways, bluegrass fairway collars and aprons, and our bentgrass tees. We do spray other fertilizer sources on greens...but this product is used extensively there also.

I vividly remember Wayne Kussow advising the audience more than once or twice that if soil tests show high levels of K...why keep applying more of the stuff? All of our soil testing over the years has shown our fairways to have high levels of P and K...so a high N liquid product fits here perfectly. We like to keep to the basics here at Thick Skull....

Another idea that has evolved into practice here is DryJect. When I first heard about DryJect a few years ago, I was not interested and very skeptical. Bringing in a contracting team to aerify these greens after many, many seasons of traditional core aerification didn't make much sense to me. The cost of the contractors, the silica sand(UniPar), and the trucking from up near Rockford led me to believe that it was all beyond the limits of our maintenance budget.

After thinking it through for a few hundred years...light began to filter in...and we decided to try a small area for a demonstration. DryJect Chicago is actually located here in Morris...and they were very anxious

for a chance to show us their stuff. The guys from DryJect showed remarkable patience with me as I muddled my way through the process of letting this good idea evolve into practice. We honestly didn't see great results from their demo...probably due to it being too small an area. Better results would show up in a situation in which half of three or four greens were DryJected and differences judged over a growing season.

Over the years, we had tried out many different versions of greens aerification. In the past, we core aerified spring and fall...to the dismay of springtime golfers, golf staff, owners, etc. We quickly modified our program into solid tine spring, core aerify fall...which evolved over time into possibly solid tine spring and fall...and then a few seasons when we did nothing in the spring...and solid tine fall. A general decline with declining results...the emergence of more and more algae...and a bit of moss...as we continued to

## Ice on the greens?



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cut and maintain Penncross as though it really could tolerate repeated seasons at .125 cutting height.

We initially DryJected all of our greens in mid-May...using four machines and about forty tons of UniPar. Within two or three weeks...remarkable things were happening. Greens filled in and became much denser...with the algae getting crowded out! Our greens looked healthy, dense, and uniform!

The science behind this is simple. As high pressure water injection sucks the sand down into the hole...the layering that I had let build up over too many years of aerification and topdressing inconsistency is broken up...creating thousands of channels for water, oxygen, and root infiltration. Golfers noticed quite quickly that our greens were markedly better, and once they pointed it all out to me...even I could see the obvious improvement in our greens! DryJect is a most excellent maintenance practice...especially on these native soil greens.

We repeated the whole thing in late October...for another \$5,800. Not that we had the money just lying around or could even really afford the cost. Basically, we got the green light because our owners wanted the course at its best to show to possible buyers...*kind of like cleaning up the cows before auction*. Golf and outing schedules force guys like me into much later

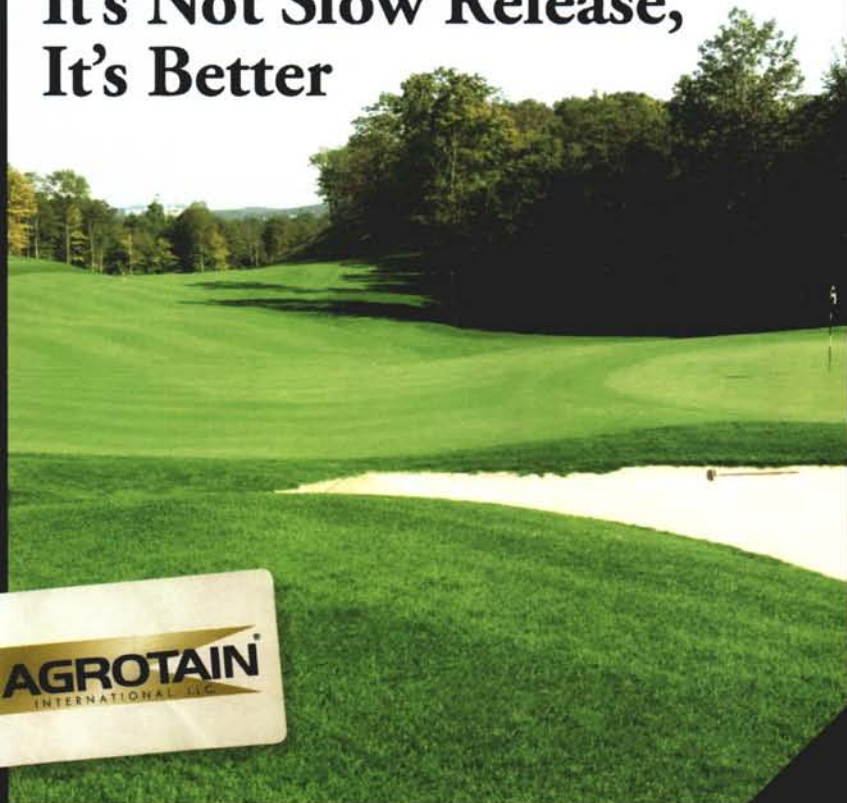
aerification dates than are desirable...but with this process there is no muss, no fuss, no plugs to clean up, minimal sand to drag in...and the job is complete!

We all know that each golf season is different and that change is inevitable. Our elderly owners did not find a buyer for this place...so for them...they did the next best thing. They decided to lease the golf course out to Tim Miles Sr. and his company GolfVisions. So I will soon be an employee of his company and be experiencing some interesting changes...which is fine with this veteran superintendent. I look forward to working for a company that manages or leases ten courses versus a single course owned and operated by relatives.

Be it ideas and practices involving greens aerification, fertilization practices, or anything else out here on the course...a company that specializes in golf course management interests me greatly. Myself and the others here who are going to work for GolfVisions will fit in beautifully. We will find out in 2008 what really is required to make this golf course operate profitably...and wonder aloud why it was that...for all of these years...we did not or could not...achieve that elusive goal of profitability.

Probably...we need to have more good ideas evolve into standard practices. 

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