Fewer Dollars Requires More Sense!

By David Brandenburg, *Golf Course Manager, Rolling Meadows Golf Course*

By all accounts this year's symposium was jam packed with important and useful information many of us can use immediately. The committee did a great job securing speakers and the topic couldn't be more important given today's economic challenges.

Many thanks to Shelly Mazurek and Jaime Staufenbeil from Milorganite who do all the behind the scenes work to make the symposium happen. The committee has it easy with those two to pick up the pieces and do all the organization. Also thanks are needed for Milorganite who supports all the speaker and building costs to allow the profit from the symposium to go to the O.J Noer Foundation.

Incoming WGCSA President provided the opening remarks and presented the Legacy Awards to the following students.

Kurt Van Auken son of David Van Auken of Antigo Bass Lake is attending UW Lacrosse, majoring in Exercise and Sports Science.

Mikka Schaller is the daughter of Scott Shaller of North Shore Country Club and is attending UW Madison, majoring in Political Science.

Maggie Janzen, daughter of Roy Janzen of Forest Hills is a 2 time winner attending UW Stout majoring in Food Systems and Technology.

Shelly Mazurek of Milorganite thanked the group for attending and presented Joe Deschler with a shirt and hat for being the only person in attendance that was at the first symposium 44 years ago! Perhaps Joe went to his first symposium as a 10 year old so he is not really that old, but I have my doubts on that.

Stuart Lindsey

Dr. Frank Rossi

Stuart Lindsey of Edgehill Golf Advisors presented "Turf Care in Tough Times" and gave an industry wide financial picture. It was not pretty or a pick-me-up for those in attendance. The industry as a whole is facing a declining participation rate based on total population along with a declining play rate among occasional and frequent (committed) players. This drop in rounds played comes at the same time the number of golf courses has increased further diluting available rounds. The one positive trend for the industry overall is more courses closed in 2008 and 2009 than opened.

Research shows that time is far and away the biggest reason golfers are playing less followed by cost which was a distant second. Results of the same research shows players choose the course the play based primarily on course conditions followed by price, pace of play while layout brings up the fourth reason. This information led to a discussion that the difficulty of modern golf courses is slowing down play and reducing rounds numbers because players do not like to take 5 hours to play 18 holes.

Golf course superintendents can look at their courses for ways to speed up play by reducing the challenge for the average handicap player. Changes can be made to course setup, green speed, rough height and tree pruning to increase the pace of play.

Stuart then turned his presentation to the profitability of golf courses or perhaps the lack of profit would be a better description. As the management at golf courses saw a trend of decreasing rounds they cut prices to try to keep their market share. Since price is not the primary reason golfers choose a course the reduced rates did not increase rounds. Instead the discounting reduced revenue at a time costs are rising.

As managers of a golf courses largest cost center golf course superintendents are asked to reduce costs and endure budget cuts. Lindsey discussed the neces-

sity for superintendents to use time studies to understand, prioritize and justify their labor budgets. Labor can account for up to 70% of a golf course budget while managing personnel can take up to 70% of the superintendent's time.

Stuart felt staff training should be the turf mangers number one priority and gave two pieces of advice. "If employees don't know what you expect from them, they will not meet expectations". That makes a lot of sense and seems simple but surprisingly often gets left behind in a busy schedule. The second piece of wisdom was "what gets measured gets done, but what gets rewarded gets done better".

Stuart expressed that time-studies should be used to evaluate methods to increase staff productivity and compare one employee's efficiency with another's inefficiency.

Golf courses of all types have many challenges to survive and prosper through the current economic downturn. Smart operators will be able to provide quality conditions in a time efficient manner to produce a profitable golf course.

After the cheerful prognosis from Lindsey, Dr. Frank Rossi, Cornell University presented "The Bethpage Project: The Art and Science of Pesticide Reduction". Dr. Rossi presented work done at the Green Course at the Bethpage State Park after legislation was proposed to ban all pesticides on municipal golf courses in New York State.

The Green Course is one of 5 at the state park that covers 1,500 acres and sees 260,000 rounds annually. The Green Course opened in 1936 and is considered one of the easier layouts in comparison to Bethpage Black or Red.

The projects first goal was to develop an improved understanding of strategies to reduce pesticides for putting green main-

Eric Watkins

Dr. Jim Kerns


Kristopher Pinkerton, Brian Ferrie, Rod Johnson, Robert Vavrek

Todd Quinto

Bob Vavrek

tenance. The second was to demonstrate to policy makers the potential effect a immediate ban would have on golf courses.

The research included greens with 3 different treatments; conventional treatment, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) treatment and a non-chemical treatment that was abandoned and changed to a biologically based reduced risk treatment.

The 6 non-chemical greens had widespread turf loss from dollar spot leading to a 20 to 30% reduction in rounds and a change to the biologically based reduced risk research. This result was important in convincing legislators a total loss of turf chemicals would be detrimental to the golf industry.

Some of the greens were maintained with an alternative cultural plan using reduced mowing frequency by rolling on non-mowing days, solid tine cultivation every 3 to 4 weeks, weekly spiking and a "dusting" of topdressing every 7-10 days. Only N, Fe and Primo were used with no Phosphorus or Potassium.

Dr Rossi presented the keys to progressive IPM.

- Use historical records to learn from the past
- Manage plant health populations
- Check predictive disease models
- Thresholds of disease do not work on greens
- Use Environmental Impact Quotient
- Treat greens preventively
- Focus on playability not aesthetics for tees and fairways
- Seek large scale reductions in applications

Overall Dr. Rossi presented some great information on reduced fertilizer and pesticide applications use that saved money while providing a satisfactory playing conditions.

Next up was Todd Quinto, Golf Course Architect with Lohmann Golf Designs with a talk titled "Can Smarter Renovations Cost You Less in The Long Run". Todd expressed the top 5 factors of renovations are:

- Improve course conditions
- Minimize ongoing costs
- Pace of Play
- Difficulty of Setup
- Think Proactively

Proper tree management is important for mature courses as aging trees or trees in the wrong location can cause problems with shade, moisture competition,

air circulation, debris cleanup and microclimate conditions. Tree location can also compromise course playability and the original design concepts.

Tees can be examined and adjusted in size in relation to the amount of play they receive. Operators can eliminate unused areas to reduce product and labor costs. Tees also need to be looked at as an important part of course setup through tee marker placement and players using the tees that meet their abilities.

Next Todd discussed greens as the most important aspect of play. Proper re-grassing efforts can be key to reducing water and chemical inputs while providing a more consistent playing surface from green to green. Quinto has found green roll-offs regaining popularity to provide higher handicap players an easier recovery when they miss a green and give players the perception of a larger green surface as they make their approach shots.

Sand bunkers have become a hot topic as a labor-intensive part of the golf course. Once considered hazards with little input, sand bunkers are now expected to perform with consistency from hole to hole. Quinto gave numbers comparing the building and maintenance costs of flat sand bunkers to bunkers with the sand flashed up. Todd gave the attendees plenty to think about for future course improvements.

Bob Vavrek, Senior Agronomist, United States Golf Association Green Section presented "Maintenance Standards - One Size Does Not Fit All". With today's economic challenges, maintenance standards can be a golf course superintendent's best friend in justifying the results of budget cuts.

Bob was quick to point out bigger is not better when it comes to maintenance standards for your club. The best examples he has seen are 1 to 3 pages long in comparison to some 30 to 40 page monsters no one reads or understands. Maintenance standards are an effective tool to manage controversial topics and not employee manuals or job duty descriptions.

Standards should address mowing heights, green speed, hole locations, bunker conditions, tree placement, irrigation philosophy, winter play, frost delays, cart policies, aerification or topdressing practices and other items that effect play.

A course without standards has ambiguous goals, hopes and wishes that are tough to follow and even harder to justify. Vavrek offered that a team approach needs to be used to create the standards with all departments and interested parties involved. He was clear to say "standards" are attainable based on the budget and property while "better" is a just a goal. Don't promise what you cannot offer and be sure to use ranges in your standards not absolutes. Superintendents can use time-labor-studies to justify what they can and cannot accomplish while digital photos and graphs can simplify technical info.

Wednesday morning brought Dr. Frank Rossi back for "Beyond Organic: Sustainable Golf Turf Management" and a continuation on his research on reducing inputs. Organic is a buzz word that is often misunderstood and used. Organic does not equal safe and synthetic does not equal danger. During the recent economic challenges the general public's concern with the environment has declined. Most citizens want to protect the environment but less are willing to pay more to do it during a recession.

Golf's has some challenges as a fossil fuel dependent recreation viewed as a cosmetic, elitist sport. Dr. Rossi's work has shown that we cannot maintain quality turf by cultural practices alone and we need to use turf protectant products to meet golfer expectations.

Sustainable golf recognizes the cost of each practice independent of the organic or synthetic label. It focuses on inputs and outputs along with the carbon footprint of products and practices on the golf course. On the positive sustainable golf also focuses on golf's environmental positives with carbon sequestration, watershed protection, recreational value and economic value.

Sustainable golf uses economically sound and socially responsible management to reduce or change inputs to provide playing conditions. We have the opportunity as turf mangers to provide a environmentally compatible management system that puts a premium on precision. Overall, golf course maintenance has been sloppy with our methods and can do a better job at doing our job through precise measuring and application at the proper times.

Dr. Rossi spoke on global warming or climate change as he calls it, and the effect humans may or may not have on it. No one knows for sure why the climate is changing but it is and we can expect it to continue.

Carbon footprint is and will continue to be a term we should familiarize ourselves with. Not just the carbon we produce from out actions but how much embodied energy is there to make and deliver the fuel, fertilizer, turf products and water that we use? Golf courses can reduce their carbon footprint by mowing less often and mowing less acreage. Efficiencies in mowing patterns and transporting around the golf course will reduce our footprint. Something as simple as a mowing pattern with less turning can reduce fuel consumption by 20%.

In conclusion sustainable golf turf management places a premium on precision in all that we do, makes economic sense, keeps our focus on the output and is a fresh look at turf science that is here to stay.

Dr. Eric Watkins, University of Minnesota continued out education with "Low Maintenance Grasses: Reduce Inputs, Not Quality." We have

many grassing options for golf turf in Wisconsin and Minnesota so we need to look at the research and features of each type of grass.

Watkins current work involves finding low input grasses that are disease and insect resistant, drought tolerant, slow growing and use less fertilizer for greens, fairways and roughs.

Plots for greens include Creeping, Velvet and Colonial Bentgrasses along with Hard, Chewings and Sheep Fescues. It is early in the process but it will require a change in golfer's expectations for the fescues to be selected as the quality was bad but the playability was good. The modern golfer expects good quality and playability.

Fairway plots were given three levels of traffic and no water in 2006 and one irrigation event during a drought in 2007. Creeping and Velvet Bentgrass, Kentucky, Supina, Annual, Rough and Canada Bluegrasses, Hard, Tall, Chewings and Sheep Fescues, Tufted Hairgrass, Redtop, Alkaligrass, Timothy and Perennial Ryegrass were all tested. With the dry conditions in 2007 the fescues showed some promise as for long term survival.

Dr. Watkins also presented the best methods for turning Kentucky Blue roughs into fescue and other native grasses. Minnesota and Wisconsin have just started the LIST Study to find Low Input Sustainable Turf". The study will cover 10 locations, 12 species and 3 mowing heights. The results from this widespread multi-state study will be valuable to the future of golf course maintenance.

Dr. Jim Kerns, University of Wisconsin Madison gave a talk titled "Novel Dollar Spot Management Strategies that Reduce Fungicide Expenditures". From a quick history of pathology and dollar spot we learned the disease was a problem in the 1920's when it was called little brown patch. When fungicides of the 1970's and early 1980 effectively controlled dollar spot it was considered a minor problem and little research was continued on the disease. This time-out in dollar spot research has led to a lack of understanding for this increasingly challenging disease. Adding to the challenge is the fact current disease forecast models are often not effective and dollars spot has shown resistance to some fungicides.

Golf courses are using much less nitrogen than years ago in effort to reduce mowing frequency and over-plush conditions so the symptoms of dollar spot are more evident. Dr. Kerns is working with a multi state collaboration to forecast when we can expect outbreaks of dollar spot so treatments can begin preventively when they are more effective.

Kerns also is working on research to determine if early season applications of fungicides can delay dollar spot outbreak later into summer. Early cleanup of the disease may allow a reduction in total fungicide applications during the year. Dr. Kerns joined Dr. Rossi in advising not to use threshold levels to determine when to treat dollar spot, because by the time we notice the disease it spreads quickly and is more difficult to control.

The symposium has historically finished with 3 real life experiences on the year's topic by active golf course superintendents. Rod Johnson, Pine Hills Country Club, Kris Pinkerton, Oshkosh Country Club and Brian Ferrie, Horseshoe Bay Golf Club gave insight into how they have reduced expenses in their maintenance departments.

Rod Johnson has used time-studies for 28 years to become more efficient and is mowing less while using more part time employees to "mow and go". Capital equipment purchases have been put on hold and staff hours have been cut. Rod and his staff have become relied on growth regulators to reduce growth and fine tuned pesticide rates and intervals between applications.

Brian Ferrie adjusts programs every year to become more efficient but for the past few years has been forced to adapt even more. A smaller staff has led to increased challenges for the crew. Brian has recommended and obtained bigger and more efficient equipment to allow the staff to compete their duties quicker. As a second club for most of his members Ferrie is tasked with providing a great product every day as it may be months between member visits. In other words a first impression for the year may be the only impression he gets with a member.

Kris Pinkerton discussed a difficult couple years at Oshkosh as member numbers dipped reducing income. His staff has adapted to maintaining and managing the HVAC system, swimming pool and tennis court facility and staffs. Money was saved in fertilizer applications, longer mowing intervals, less line trimming and no annual flowers. Oshkosh had 3 member work days where the members filled divots on fairways on Monday evenings. The events allowed for some one on one communication between the staff and members.

Bob Vavrek, Agronomist, United States Golf Association Green Section ended the symposium with his annual wrap-up of the speakers and the take home messages. All the symposiums I have attended have been good but this one hits the top of the scale with timely valuable information we can use immediately. Time-studies were hit on by multiple speakers as necessary for turf managers to justify labor expenses.

Cuts to budgets are with us for the near future and may help bring golf towards a mindset to balance environmental conservancy with playability.

Thank you to the speakers for the great content, and to the attendees who took time to join us. Those who could not or did not join us this year really missed out on a premier educational opportunity.