

Rained Out at Strawberry Creek

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

April 23rd started out as one of the nicer mornings of 2013 but hopes for golf at The Club at Strawberry Creek quickly faded as rain moved in and temperatures plummeted. After the golf event was officially cancelled only a few diehard golfers braved the elements to enjoy the course provided by Host Superintendent Matt Kregel and his staff.

The wind driven rain did not stop Dr. Tom Voigt, Extension Specialist at the University of Illinois from speaking on The Trials and Tribulations with Un-Mowed Roughs. As many courses have gone from wall to wall groomed turf to allowing out of play areas to grow naturally the maintenance headaches caused by these areas have turf managers looking for answers.

The quest for a un-mowed turf that is weedfree and easy to find a golf ball and play a golf ball is a honorable one but it is not maintenance free or inexpensive. The group listened intently for advice from Dr. Voigt.

Successful low maintenance areas are defined by; 1. Appealing to look at. 2. Weed free. 3. Easy to find a golf ball. 4. Possible to hit a golf ball. 5. Low maintenance. Dr. Voigt quickly said the keys to success are choosing the correct plant for the correct environment and managing it correctly.

As much as the crowd wanted to hear and as much as Tom wanted to tell us the secret to allowing 50 year old stands of blue/rye/fescue roughs to grow up and be playable without maintenance we soon realized there is no secret to the impossible. Instead we have thick fallen over grasses make it impossible to find a ball much less play it and keep the weeds out.

To produce successful native areas turf managers usually have to start from scratch and kill off the existing turf and plant a desirable species that matches the environment. One challenge we have in the badger state is our environment is too good with healthy soils and ample mois-

ture causing thick turf or weed invasions.

Common native grasses such as big bluestem, indian grass and switch grass can be seeded while prairie cord grass needs to be plugged or have rhizomes spread. On the positive side these grasses are attractive, can be low maintenance and only need an annual mowing or burning. The negatives are they are slow to establish and can look ugly during establishment, are usually not playable and are easily invaded by weeds and undesirable species.

Other grasses that are shorter include buffalo grass, blue grama, side oats grama, little bluestem and prairie dropseed. These grasses are native to the great plains and attractive but again the negatives are slow establishment, ugly during establishment, slow to green up in spring and there is limited weed control.

Fine fescue can provide a playable turf but Dr. Voigt suggested avoiding


creeping red and chewings fescue. Hard and sheeps fescue can work if kept on the dryer side when seeded at 1# per thousand square feet. Compacted sites need to be avoided. The areas should be mowed in the fall and if clippings are abundant they should be collected to avoid smothering the turf. At 1 to 1.5 pounds of nitrogen per year they areas may not get too thick but often the plants topple over in late summer causing problems with appearance and finding balls.

Burning can be used and Dr. Voigt suggested fall burning is hotter and favors forbs while spring burning is cooler and favors warm season grasses.

Research done at the Midwest Golf House showed blue grama provided a good un-mowed turf with inexpensive seeding and easy establishment at 20# per acre. It can be used alone or with buffalo grass and is easy to find and hit balls from. The negative was a slow spring green up even in Illinois. A trial should be done at your site to determine the results before trying any widespread planting.

I had asked the best way to convert our Heinz 57 mix of turf to a native mix and Tom suggested a roundup application followed by a tight mowing with clippings removed followed by another roundup application and slit seeding.

Dr. Voigt finished with advice on seed quality and storage. Native grasses are sold and planted by PLS or Pure Live Seed which is the % pure seed x the best germination rate. In the field the germination rate will be less depending on many factors. Seed should be used in the year purchased as the germination rate of many species can quickly fall.

Although we did not get the magic we were looking for to convert our thick blue/rye/fescue roughs to a playable maintenance free turf Tom did provided us with the tools to do some trials and see what works in our environment. 



Dr. Tom Voigt, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois speaking on the Trials and Tribulation of Un-Mowed Roughs.



TOP: Our Hosts Assistant Superintendent Jeremy Dahl and Golf Course Superintendent Matt Kregel.

MIDDLE: Hole 2 at the Club at Strawberry Creek shows off the many native grass areas the course features.

BELOW: The group listens for advice on native areas from Dr. Tom Voigt.

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