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Self-Inflicted Problems Can Be Hard To Swallow

By **Darin Bevard**, Senior Agronomist, United State Golf Association Green Section

Editors Note: This article originally appeared in the June 22 *Green Section Record Vol 50*. It is used here with permission.

During the last two years, weather extremes throughout much of the country have provided major challenges for golf course superintendents and their ability to maintain expected playing conditions. The intense heat in the Southeast, the extreme drought and heat in the southern U.S., or flooding rains experienced in much of the Mid-Atlantic Region and portions of the Midwest, just to name a few, remind us that Mother Nature reigns supreme in the golf course business. In spite of these weather extremes, expectations for golf course conditions remained at a high level.

This places the superintendent in a precarious position, and decisions are often made to satisfy immediate expectations when the goal should be to keep the grass as healthy as possible during stressful conditions. Short-term thinking usually contributes to turfgrass decline and deteriorating playing conditions that could have been avoided. What follows are a few suggestions for superintendents and golfers to limit some of the most common causes of self-inflicted injury.

READ THE LABEL

This should go without saying, but misapplication of pesticides, growth regulators, and fertilizers is a major source of self-inflicted turfgrass injury. In many cases, a proper pesticide application is made, but environmental conditions are such that the grass is more susceptible to damage from a particular product. Even fungicides that are applied to help the turf can have negative impacts in certain instances. There is a lot more information on the pesticide label than just what pest is controlled and the rate of application. Simple language on the label may warn that a particular product should not be applied above or below a specified temperature or under conditions of moisture stress. Some



Implementing aeration strategies on cool-season turfgrass during severe summer stress may cause damage that requires weeks to recover. Simply because the date of aeration is on the calendar should not mean there are not other options. It is important for both superintendents and golfers to be flexible.

labels go as far as cautioning against application to a specific turfgrass species or cultivar under certain conditions.

Fertilizer applications also should be scrutinized. Applying the wrong fertilizer at the wrong time can cause severe turf burn that may require weeks to recover. Know the material that you are applying and its release characteristics. Even stabilized fertilizer products can lead to foliar burn when conditions are questionable. Understanding the release characteristics of a product is critical because even a perfect fertilizer application can burn the grass if humidity and temperature conditions promote rapid release of the fertilizer product.

In short, read the entire label and double check application rates and timings. It may save you from great hardship.

BE FLEXIBLE

In the Mid-Atlantic Region, core aeration of putting greens is often scheduled in the second or third week of August. While this is not the ideal aeration timing, it provides benefits for the golfers and the golf schedule. When all goes as planned, the greens are healed by Labor Day, and the fall golf season is not interrupted by a major aeration event. The downside of this timing is that the weather can still be very hot and stressful, and the grass may already be weak. Core aeration and clean-up are stressful for any turfgrass area, even when weather conditions are optimal. It may be necessary to perform a less aggressive aeration strategy or postpone aeration for cool-season grasses if summer stress is severe at the time that aeration is scheduled, especially on putting greens.

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USGA GREEN SECTION

In too many instances, superintendents have done a splendid job managing the grass through the severe summer heat only to experience major turfgrass decline in late August following aeration. Just because aeration is on the schedule, the date should not be carved in stone. Be flexible, and the same suggestion applies to golfers too. Communicate why a certain practice should be postponed. Someone may have to putt on aerated greens in the fall, but it beats putting on severely damaged greens from August into October.

Flexibility is not only necessary with major practices such as aeration. Simply mowing the greens or other turf areas when they are too wet can create damage that will take a long time to heal. If at all possible, avoid mowing when soil moisture is too high. Ironically, wet conditions that persisted throughout the spring and fall of 2011 in many parts of the region forced mowing in spite of concern for mechanical damage to the turf. Golfers were screaming that the rough was too thick and tall, and the grass was getting so tall that forgoing mowing would have been more of a problem than mechanical damage. Sometimes there is no right

answer when challenging weather conditions persist.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOLFERS?

Avoiding self-inflicted problems is not all about the superintendent. Golfers play a major role. Superintendents do not try to shoot themselves in the foot. Maintenance decisions are made on a daily basis in an effort to meet golfer expectations and keep the grass alive. Golfers need to realize that stressful environmental conditions often call for conservative maintenance strategies until the weather improves. This may mean that the greens are not as fast and fairways not as firm as many desire.

Golfers should abide by cart restrictions, signage, etc. These restrictions are implemented to protect their investment and preserve playing conditions, not to inconvenience the golfer or make the superintendent's life easier. Frost delays are not a mechanism to allow the maintenance staff to "sleep in." Damage from carts or other



Mower damage was a major problem in the Mid-Atlantic Region throughout 2011. When wet weather persists long enough, it may be necessary to sacrifice some of the wetter areas in an effort to maintain the turfgrass stand as a whole. This can be a difficult decision.

traffic that is inflicted on a single day may require several weeks or more to recover. And to achieve recovery often requires extra agronomic inputs, which in turn has financial implications on the budget. Listen to the reasons and rationale behind the decisions that are made.

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USGA GREEN SECTION

Finally, flexibility is needed in the golf calendar. Aeration programs may need to be rescheduled if the weather is not conducive to implementation on the originally scheduled date. This may be inconvenient at the time, but it is much less than the inconvenience caused when areas of dead grass develop on a green from an ill-timed aeration that could require weeks to recover.


THE GOLDEN RULE

If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. A shadow of doubt in your mind regarding a maintenance practice during periods of turfgrass stress should be a big red flag.

Call it agronomic intuition, if you will. While one does not want to use weather as an excuse, the weather, in fact, is the number-one factor in daily maintenance decisions. If you do not feel comfortable with a maintenance practice (for example, grooming or verticutting) when the turfgrass is under considerable environmental stress, then do not do it. There is a reason you feel uncomfortable, and the reason is that the practice in question has the potential to create problems. Don't risk it.

Golfers need to adhere to periodic cart and traffic restrictions, and they should be

supportive of maintenance decisions that are made to protect the turf, which ultimately protects the main asset of the facility — the golf course. Tolerating a short period of less aggressive maintenance or a day or two of cart restrictions may result in better playing conditions a week or two down the road. Do not be shortsighted.

Looking at dead or damaged playing surfaces that were affected by the implementation of a routine maintenance practice that was supposed to be beneficial can be heartbreaking. Avoid self-inflicted damage by making cautious decisions when the weather is not in your favor. The pressure to meet daily golfer expectations can be immense, but it is easier to explain healthy grass that putts "slow" rather than dead grass that plays "fast." Trust your agronomic intuition. 



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Golfers can help by following cart and other traffic restrictions put forward by the superintendent. Albeit slightly inconvenient, the ultimate goal is to prevent damage to the course.



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State Open Visits Racine Country Club

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

Mike Handrich is a 29 year member of the Wisconsin State Golf Course Superintendents Association and has been the Certified Golf Course Superintendent at Racine Country Club since 1989. Mike and the club recently hosted the Wisconsin PGA's 92 Annual Wisconsin State Open.

The event held August 21 to 22 featured 72 holes of stroke play with 18 holes on Monday and Tuesday followed by a cut to the top 60 players and ties to finish with 36 holes. The State Open is open to any legal resident of the State of Wisconsin, golf professionals working as such within the state, PGA professionals working as such within the Wisconsin Section, PGA and all exempt players.

7 qualifying sites are used to fill the field along with the exempt players based on past performance. At Racine Andrew Steinhof of Madison and Vitense Golfland took the \$7,200 first place prize by shooting a 3 under 281. The 20 year old turned pro at 19 rather than play college golf and has been working on his game and playing mini-tour events.

Taking second place with even par was Racine Country Club member Ben Bendtsen III followed by 2008 Open winner Ryan Helminen of Appleton at one over par 285.

Racine Country Club was founded in 1900 as a 9 hole club just west of Racine and in 1901 joined 8 other clubs to found the Wisconsin State Golf Association. The club moved to its current location in 1909 again as a 9 hole course until property was purchased and the club expanded to 18 holes in 1926.

The first nine holes at the current location were designed and built by Joseph Rossman. Rossman had been a caddy at Philadelphia Country Club before becoming the professional/greenskeeper at Des Moines Golf and Country Club. He served a similar role at Racine until about 1916, when he moved to the Chicago area and founded the Rossman Tractor Mowing Company.

The second 9 opened in July of 1927 and was designed by golf professional Ted Sloan who went on to design the neighboring Meadowbrook Country Club later that year. Sloan stayed at Ra-



The Par 4 7th Hole Plays 422 Yards From the Blue Tees.

cine until 1934 when he left to design and be the golf professional at the City of Racine's new Johnson's Park Golf Course.

The course was basically unchanged until the mid 1970's when Roger Packard was brought in to remodel the course. In 2005 Mark Mungeam of Cornish, Silva and Mungeam created a master plan and oversaw the renovation of the bunkers.

Handrich is pleased with the new bunkers as they drain well and were designed to reduce run off and erosion from turf around the bunkers. Most days the bunkers only need a touch up raking and have been easy to maintain.

Mike adds his name to a list of long serving golf course superintendents with WGCSA Charter Member Eugene Fox 1928-1949, John Crewe 1950-1970, Harold Schuemann 1971-1978, Dennis (Skip) Willms 1979-1988 and Mike himself for 25 years.

2012 Wisconsin State Open Qualifying Sites and Host Superintendents

- Timber Ridge Golf Club - Jay Pritzl
- Meadowbrook Country Club - Jeff Normant
- Nakoma Golf Club - Craig Filley
- Castle Course at Northern Bay - Paul Schippers
- Eagle Creek Golf Club - Andy Noll
- Washington County Golf Club - David Jahnke
- Kenosha Country Club - Scott Verdun

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Member 9 With Mike Handrich

1. First Vehicle? *Mercury Lynx*
2. Favorite Piece of Golf Course Equipment? *Toro Procore*
3. 18 Hole Handicap? *18*
4. Current Vehicle? *Toyota Tundra*
5. Favorite TV Show? *None*
6. Favorite Pro Sports Team? *Milwaukee Brewers*
7. Favorite Main Course Meal? *Bone in Ribeye*
8. Pets? *Cat Woggie*
9. Favorite Thing About Working In Golf Industry? *People*



The hard working staff at Racine Country Club provides a great product for the members.

COVER STORY

While touring the course with Mike he made it clear he enjoys working with his staff and gives them credit for the course conditions. Handrich fully appreciates all they do for the club and thanks Heather Henning for her leadership as assistant superintendent.

The staff is mainly maintaining bentgrass/poa annua mix greens, tees and fairways although credits his use of Primo and Cutless to increase bentgrass populations. One challenge for the staff is being in the flood plain of the Root River so the course

has faced numerous flooding events over the years. Mike has taken a conservative approach to golf course maintenance using proven cultural practices to encourage plant health. He has been able to remove some trees to allow for greater airflow and sunshine especially behind the 9th green.

Handrich does not expect any changes to the course for the open players as the staff strives to maintain the course to championship levels for daily member play.

Mike lives in Racine with his wife Karen and originally wanted to work for the

DNR but during college he realized those opportunities were limited so he switched to the “best turf program in the country at UW-Madison”. While at Madison Handrich interned for Monroe Miller at Blackhawk Country Club before acquiring his B.S. degree in Agriculture in 1983.

Handrich served at Ville du Parc Country Club in Mequon before taking his current post at Racine Country Club.

Congratulations to Mike and the staff for providing a great golf course to challenge the states best players. 



Racine offers a large short game practice area with two greens with bunkers connected by fairway turf as part of its practice facility.



The Par 5 525 yard 9th features a small but healthy green since the brush and trees have been cleared on the hillside behind the green.