

GROOMING THE PUTTING SURFACE

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To most golfers, turf management involves little more than mowing, fertilizing, irrigation and occasional applications of chemicals to control various unidentified pests. The many details of a good turfgrass management program go unnoticed by most of us, and perhaps this is as it should be.

One of these details which golf superintendents concern themselves with is the grooming of the putting surface. Providing a smooth, true, fast surface involves much more than frequent mowing. Many little tricks of the trade are utilized to obtain the desired results. To appreciate fully why some of these techniques are necessary and how they work, it is helpful to understand how the putting green grasses grow if they receive only minimum maintenance. Both bentgrass and bermudagrass, two of the most important grasses cultured for use on greens in this country, tend to produce prostrate-type growth when they receive a minimum program of regular mowing. If allowed to continue, this results in a textured, leafy appearance which is sometimes referred to as grain. Grain is the subject of lengthy arguments in many locker rooms, but there is little doubt that slow, bumpy, untrue greens are one of the consequences.

To combat this problem, techniques have evolved to force the prostrate-type growth to grow more upright. The results are comparable to putting on a shag rug versus putting on a tightly-knit, dense carpet, although the actual cutting height has much less to do with the difference than many people believe.

Perhaps the best place to begin a program of grooming the putting turf is with the greens mower itself. Some models have accessory brushes which can be mounted to the frame and project out in front of the mower as it moves across the green. These brushes are made of wire or thin metal strips and act to fluff up the turf, especially the prostrate-type growth, before it is mowed to produce a crisp, clean cut. Another accessory is the comb, which is mounted near the front roller on the mowing unit. It is simply a bar with metal teeth which project down into the turf and fluff it up before it is cut. Also a special grooved roller, called the Wiele Roller, can be used instead of the traditional solid roller on the front of the mowing unit. This grooved roller tends less to mat the grass down before it is cut than the other. These three accessories are inexpensive and convenient to use. They function as part of the mowing machine and do not require an extra operation to achieve the desired results. However, sometimes other techniques also must be employed to combat successfully the buildup of grain on the greens.

An effective, easy method is to drag some type of mat across the turf surface before the green is mowed. This works on the same principle as the mower-mounted brushes, but good results are achieved usually much faster. The mats are made often of metal, but any convenient material may be used. In fact, utility brooms are used often to brush the greens before mowing.

Another very effective technique for grooming the turf is to vertical mow the greens. This is known also as verticutting the greens and involves the use of specialized mowing units with vertical cutting blades to cut down into the turf surface. They are similar to the units available to the homeowner from rental centers and are used for dethatching lawns. This technique is based on the principle that the vertical blades will cut through the thatch and remove the prostrate-type growth, to produce a smooth, true putting surface. The secret of this operation is to set the units very shallow so that they just nick the surface of the turf. A good rule of thumb is that if you can see the grooves the machine is making, it is cutting too deeply. It is recommended that verticutting be done frequently, several times per month is possible, especially during the spring and fall when weather conditions are favorable. Verticutting greens is a very effective means of controlling the grain, but it requires the purchase of a separate machine or units which fit into the triplex putting green mower, and it takes extra time to perform the operation. However, the results would appear to justify the means.