



LIGHT-WEIGHT FAIRWAY MOWING

UPDATE AT INTERLACHEN

by DOUG MAHAL
Superintendent Interlachen Country Club

Our light-weight fairway mowing program began early in the 1984 season. Previously, we had heard about the incredible results obtained with the triplex cutting units on fairways and wanted to learn more about it. We conducted a survey of 17 private country clubs in the country we knew were already on the program to get a true idea of what was involved and to get the full picture right from the horse's mouth, the superintendent. We found through the results of this survey that all the clubs noticed an increase in bentgrass populations even after one year. Most of the clubs also found it necessary to reduce their fairway acreage to make the effort more manageable. Over half began using less nitrogen, less water and some even less fungicides, all at a smooth, clean 3/8" to 3/4" cutting height. These were some of the things we were looking for in our fairway program—being able to apply less water and nutrients over less acreage, reducing compaction and spin-out damage caused by the tractor units, and to increase our bentgrass population. After in-depth discussion with our board, we decided to try the program over a three-year period and analyze the results vs. expense at that time.

Our first chore was to decide on the best type of mowing equipment for our conditions. We considered our topography, soil type, desired quality and maintenance factors. We looked at the 5-gang, wide 3-gangs and finally the triplex greensmower. During the time we were demonstrating all these various pieces of equipment, we found no other unit with quite the cutting quality, maneuverability, simplicity of operation and light-weight as the triplex greensmower. Our choice was to purchase

six units in order to complete a fairway cutting in six hours or less.

Our next chore was to determine when and how often to cut, and at what height. I have always thought, agronomically speaking, that it is best to cut when the leaf surface is dry - in the afternoon or early evening. I think the cutting quality is better and the dry conditions make scattering of clippings easier. One only need throw the clippings at an angle into the wind and the breeze will help disperse them. Coupled with the drier turf and the fact that here at Interlachen we have limited play beyond 6:00 p.m., cutting is begun at 3:00 and concludes approximately 8:30. This gives us a couple good hours of uninterrupted cutting time. We determined that 1/2" cut to be very adequate to hit from and the membership found that height very pleasing visually. Three cuttings per week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday worked out well. I send cutters out in tandem, which gives a very desirable 10' stripe and also reduces the boredom an operator may experience from a continuous 5 1/2 hour cutting. When hiring operators, I looked for people who only desired part-time employment and had no other jobs. On a few occasions during the season whether it be for special events or due to rainy weather, we are obliged to cut on odd days or during morning hours. It became quite important to us to find employees with a flexible schedule. As I mentioned earlier, we are removing clippings and scattering them in the roughs. An original thought was that the clippings would really begin to pile up and start to produce some pungent odors. We have not found that to be the case at all if they are well scattered.

Improving turf quality generally requires some kind of sacrifice. We've made several on our fairway program, most being financial. The mowing process alone requires 5 1/2 times more man hours. I found it necessary to put on a part-time mechanic assistant just to keep up with the increased load. Initial machinery costs are actually about the same as the self-contained tractor/gang units but the machinery life is about one-fifth that of these larger units. We've discovered that we must perform some routine maintenance on the greensmowers after each cutting.

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The units were just not designed to cut rougher terrain found on fairways so we frequently must repair broken reel spider welds caused from nicking sprinkler heads and drain covers. Another drawback is the fact that instead of having one operator and one machine in the middle of play, the membership must now contend with six operators and six machines. Having the additional cutters also necessitates more supervisory time and mileage.

But the real bottom line is, does the program work? We've seen a surprising increase in our bentgrass population even after a year and a half. I can see patches up to 6000 sq. ft. in size of virtually pure bentgrass I hadn't seen previously. Much of that bent may have been there as individual plants or small plant groups but since beginning our light-weight mowing, these small spots have coalesced into very large areas. Another benefit has been that I can hire less skilled operators due to the ease of operation of the triplex units and the limited training time required to learn the machine. High school students are very trainable and don't need the "hard knocks" experience on their resume. We've obviously seen less compaction, which I think is the single most important factor of the whole program. We now have the capability to cross-cut fairways in three or four directions with ease. We've virtually eliminated the long grass that used to form in the subtle hollows and around old sunken tile lines and drains. As with most of the other clubs using the triplex for fairways, we did reduce our acreage from 32 to 27 and found it essential to cut back on our applications of nitrogen and water. We can still keep the turf healthy without accumulating all those clippings. Our members appreciate the drier 1/2" cut because they can hit the ball farther due to increased ball roll. Because of the maneuverability we now have, the opportunity exists to create very appealing, strong contours, which previously would have been difficult to cut with the 20' tractor unit. We've added much to the visual appearance of our fairway lines with this program.

As suggested earlier, we've made several sacrifices to obtain a quality 1/2" cut but these benefits I've discussed far outweigh the sacrifice.

I've generally touched on the past and present programs used here but what of the future? As I said, the triplex greensmower looked like the best unit for us at that time, but, as these machines wear out (about two more seasons) we'll again be looking for just the right unit. A great amount of research and development has been done as of late on the larger 3-gang and especially the hydraulic 5-gang units. Perhaps the changes in cutting quality and maneuverability make these machines the best choice for us today. We'll also be looking for a more durable unit requiring less routine maintenance and reel repair. As our bentgrass populations continue to increase, our nitrogen, water and even fungicide usage will drop. I'm sure we'll have to begin a stringent fairway verticutting program as time passes. The bent is very vigorous at 1/2". I think it is safe to say, there will never be another 8,000 Lb., 22' wide self contained tractor unit on Interlachen fairways again. The program is expensive but without doubt, the playability, eye appeal, durability and over-all improved health of our fairway turf is easily worth the expense, especially if one is trying to manage the seemingly ever-present, ever-popular species, *Poa annua*.



VANDALISM AT THE GOLF COURSE

by JOHN NYLUND
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Braemar Golf Course is a public facility in southwest Edina. It's a very busy course and also very accessible to vandalism. We all have our problems with vandalism of all forms. Sometimes very serious and sometimes minor. This particular incident happened on the night of June 25th.

Seven college students were bored at 2:00 a.m. and made the mistake of talking about