

Making Turf Conditioning Work for You

The greens conditioner has helped superintendents worldwide develop faster, healthier putting surfaces. But those who haven't tried it may wonder what it does and what benefits it provides.

The Turf Groomer, the original greens conditioner, was developed and patented by superintendent Larry Lloyd to improve the playing surface of greens. Jacobsen Division of Textron later purchased exclusive rights to the patented device.

Regular use virtually eliminates grain, helps control thatch, smooths out irregularities on greens—ball marks, old hole placements, etc.—and makes grass plants stand up for more consistent putting. The greens conditioner also allows a higher height of cut. In some cases, superintendents have gone from below 1/8" without the conditioner to 3/16" with it and maintained the same ball speed.

The higher cut gives the plant more leaf surface allowing it to perform photosynthesis more easily and develop a deeper, stronger root system. In addition, the plant is more heat and disease resistant and stands up to traffic better.

The greens conditioner also allows the reduction or elimination of other potentially harmful methods used to increase greens speed. Besides lowering cutting heights, superintendents top dress, vertical mow, roll, and reduce water and nitrogen application to make greens faster. Some of these methods stress the grass, raising the potential for disease and plant death.

Many of the benefits once limited to greens are now possible on fairways with the introduction of the fairway conditioner. In addition to grain and thatch control, and deeper roots, fairway conditioning (used in conjunction with lightweight mowing) promotes a lush, dense growth of grass that gives the golfer a better lie.

In the South, the fairway conditioner controls Bermudagrass runners, making grass plants stand up for a more consistent surface. On bentgrass, the fairway conditioner controls grain and promotes dense growth.

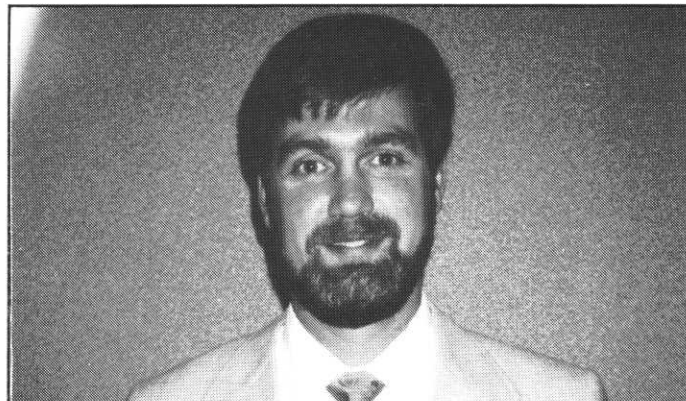
Since lightweight mowers can collect clippings, poa annua and other undesirable fairway grasses can be better controlled because many of their seedheads are removed before they can spread. The fairway conditioner continues that cleaning process, removing seedheads, worm castings, small leaves, twigs and other debris from below the cutting line for cleaner turf.

PROPER CONDITIONER USE

Before using it regularly on greens, try the conditioner in an inconspicuous area. Set the blades at bedknife level (referred to as the zero setting) and make a few passes. Note the results and gradually lower the conditioner's blades until you reach a height of cut satisfactory to you.

After careful testing, you'll be ready to use the greens conditioner on a regular basis. Use it three times a week if you plan to use an aggressive (lower) setting (more often if you use a less aggressive (higher) setting). It is recommended that you don't go more than 1/16" below your height of cut. In most cases, the height setting should be between zero and 1/16".

For fairway conditioning, start with the conditioner set at about 50 percent of your cutting height. If your cutting height is a 1/2",



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then set the conditioner a 1/4" below the bedknife and work down from there. Because the grass on a fairway is less dense than on a green, you need a lower setting to get results.

Keep in mind the conditioner will send more material through the reel and bedknife when you first start using it. But, as the turf becomes conditioned, the need to sharpen reels and bedknives will decrease.

FINDING THE RIGHT CONDITIONER

Important features to get when buying a conditioner include:

- **Roller/knife design:** the roller should stand grass blades up and support them. The knives should then rotate through the roller slots to cut them, the basic premise of conditioning. A roller and blade design that doesn't do this is of little value.
- **Durability:** fairway and greens conditioning units see some demanding use. Look for a conditioner with solid, well-constructed parts—a substantial front roller, strong cutting blades, and a sturdy metal frame to join the attachment to the mowing unit.
- **Strong, protected belt drive system:** the drive system should have a strong belt, protected by a sealed housing.
- **Protected bearings:** roller and blade shaft bearings should be protected by reliable seals with grease fittings for lubrication.
- **Compact rollerbase (distance from the center of the conditioner's front roller to the center of the cutting unit's rear roller):** the closer the conditioner is to the cutting reel, the better it will follow the contour of your turf and give a consistent cut.
- **Easy cutting height adjustment:** a way to easily raise or lower the conditioner is important. You should be able to lift the blades completely out of the way so grooming can be skipped when so desired. A method to "fine tune" cutting height, preferably without tools, is also desirable.

Greens and fairway conditioners deliver healthier turf and a better playing surface. They've become important tools for superintendents.

—Dan Miller
North Star Turf, Inc.