

The Construction Dilemma

There seems to be a great deal of renovation going on at clubs across the country. Perhaps the boom in new course construction has placed additional pressure on the older courses to upgrade their facilities in order to remain competitive in the quest for members. The most common renovation (other than a new clubhouse interior) is to rebuild the greens. Unfortunately, this decision often results in a serious split in the membership. Almost always, this split pits the older members against the younger crowd, causing hard feelings, harsh words and even resignations from the club.

What is the basis of this difference in opinion concerning the reconstruction of the greens? There are three very important questions that must be answered concerning a project of this magnitude. The answers to these questions affect older players much differently than the younger group, thus fueling the dispute.

Question 1 — “Do the greens need to be rebuilt?”

When the greens fail every year, and after the club has gone through three or four superintendents, almost everyone will finally agree the greens need to be rebuilt. However, seldom does such a clear-cut situation occur. More typically, the greens do fine one season and miserably the next. Some greens fail completely, while others can be “nursed” through the year always on the edge of disaster but never quite taking the fall. Raising cutting heights and accepting slower greens improves the health of the turf dramatically to the point that a major failure in the turf becomes unlikely. Under these conditions, the determination concerning the need for reconstruction is much more difficult. It is more difficult because the answer depends on what the players want from their greens—and the two groups of players feel they have significantly different needs.

Generally speaking, the older players in the club (and often the average women players) see no pressing need for fast, low cut greens. Stimpmeter speeds of 6 to 7 feet are tolerable if not completely acceptable. **If it means raising the cut to prevent failure and avoid reconstruction, then raise the cut!** In contrast, the younger groups of players tend to want faster greens - preferably the fastest in town. Since the lowest handicappers in the clubs typically fall into this group, they can exert a tremendous amount of influence in the club. In order to produce greens acceptable to this group, the best construction and turfgrasses are required.

Which group is right? It's a tough call to say the least. As a rule, I will suggest reconstruction. Not to give the better players faster greens, but more to urge the club to **remain viable** in the face of growing competition. New courses are being built everywhere, and they are drawing heavily from the “membership pool.” It has been my experience that clubs that constantly improve do attract and keep the most supportive members. In these cases I often paraphrase Mark Twain. “*It's great to be on the right track, but if you don't keep moving, someone will come and knock you off.*” Understandably, there are those older members who want reconstruction delayed so it does not infringe on their more limited time left to play (let's hear you phrase this more delicately). However, these same members were probably the founders of the club, the very individuals who had the foresight to build something that would endure for years. By the same token, these are the same folks who have

probably had the greatest use of the facility over many years. It is a lot to ask of everyone but something that must be done if the course is to improve. And remember, each year there will be a new group of older members that feel the same way.

Question 2 — “How much will it cost?”

There are so many variables involving construction that it is impossible to offer an accurate estimate. Just a few of the variables include:

- Do you want to completely rebuild the greensite including bunkers and mounding or are you simply going to shell out the existing greens?
- How much are materials?
- Are you going to hire a “name” architect?
- Are you going to close the course completely (and sacrifice all revenue) or play on temporary greens?
- Is this to be a “turn-key” job or are you going to do some of the work “in-house”?

Let's assume you are going to rebuild the greens, making a few changes to the bunkers and mounding. Hopefully, materials are of average cost (meaning you are not going to have to truck sand or gravel from the other side of the state). Let's also assume you have hired an experienced architect but not one whose work is likely to end up on the cover of *Golf Digest* anytime soon. You're willing to struggle through playing temporaries during the project and your superintendent and staff will support the contractor in terms of extra labor and the loan of smaller pieces of equipment. In most cases, you can safely figure somewhere between \$4 and \$6 dollars per square foot of green surface. \$5 is a reasonable average. Material costs and the proximity of a contractor are usually the most influential variables.

Question 3 - “How long will it take?”

It always amazes me how long it takes people to get to the question that really bothers them the most. If I could tell the most financially strapped club that they had a choice between spending \$500,000 and losing the course for 6 months, or spending \$1,000,000 and losing the course for 2 weeks, they would somehow raise the extra half million! This is undeniably the greatest obstacle to redoing greens — the time people have to give up playing.

I could (and probably should) write a book on the variables involved in how long it takes from starting construction until opening day. Important factors here include:

- How large is the contractor?
- How big is the job?
- Are the greens bermudagrass or bent?
- How long is your growing season?
- Are you willing to plant during the right time of the year?
- Are you willing to wait until the greens are mature before opening the course?

You get the idea. For the sake of this article, let's again make a few assumptions. Let's assume you are in the South, growing Tifdwarf bermudagrass. You will want to plant at a time of the year the bermuda is growing most actively so the greens will cover as quickly as possible. This means planting in June or July in most cases. Let's assume the contractor can complete the work in 60 days and will therefore begin in April or May.

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The greens will take about 12 weeks to cover well enough to tolerate a reasonable load of traffic, say a pace equivalent to 35,000 rounds per year. This puts your opening date in September or October, a downtime of around 6 months.

Now let's assume you are planting bentgrass greens in the Midwest. Ideally, you would plant in the fall, giving the best two growing periods (this fall and the next spring) to mature. A good target for most Midwest locations would be September 1. Again allow the contractor around 60 days, starting construction July 1 (this never happens since EVERYONE has a July 4 tournament). The maturing process on bent greens will in most cases mean waiting until the following Spring to open. April 1 is usually a safe bet. This means approximately 9 months of downtime. However, remember that these months include December, January and February, typically very slow golf months.

There are many instances where courses have opened much earlier (and much later) than the dates I have described above. Sometimes you are blessed with ideal growing conditions and the turf matures very rapidly.

Sometimes there are no rain days to slow the contractor and he finishes in less time. Sometimes everything just clicks into place.

On the other hand, sometimes you feel like Murphy was an optimist. First, the plant generating the sand falls behind. Then the contractor can't find the right equipment locally because he is building a new mall across town and every truck for 100 miles is already rented. Of course, as soon as the mix is put

on the greens, a good old "Texas Toad Floater" comes along and washes mix, coarse sand and gravel into the next county. The seed or sprigs you ordered are nowhere to be found. The members are ready to use the superintendent as pre-plant fertilizer, and the contractor and architect are pointing cans of methyl bromide at each other. Murphy never built greens.

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