

Metro Area Golf Courses Springing Back to Life

By GARY OLSON
St. Paul Pioneer Press

Mother Nature must not be a golfer. Winter was brutal on the grass that carpets area golf courses, and spring was certainly no picnic for the guys who care for it. Until recently, there was barely enough warm weather to grow the grass that survived.

Jack MacKenzie, the greens superintendent at North Oaks Golf Club, began preparing his members last November for what they should expect when the snow finally melted. It seemed inevitable.

"Nearly all the problems you've heard about his spring can be traced back to that rainstorm in mid-November," MacKenzie said. "On Nov. 15, the temperature was about 50 degrees and we got 3 to 3½ inches of rain. By Nov. 18, it had turned to ice, and the temperature had dropped to 18 degrees."

It created a problem, called crown hydration, with which many golfers have become familiar this spring. It caused the saturated plant cells to burst.

"Where there was standing water, the chances were pretty good that you'd find a problem in the spring," MacKenzie said. "We had a fair amount of damage, but the level of acceptance today is considerably different from what it was in the 1960s and '70s. Our golfers have come to expect nearly perfect conditions, and for a few, their tolerance has dropped.

"When everything goes good, Mother Nature and I work in tandem. But when a few things go wrong, there are some golfers who think Mother Nature still does her job but that I've botched mine.

"Superintendents have become smarter — you need to know more than water runs downhill — because

our golfers expect more. Mother Nature continues to be the limiting element."

The degrees of higher learning that greenskeepers hang on the walls of what used to be called the equipment shacks didn't impress Mother Nature. Brown splotches dotted fairways and greens with varying degrees of seriousness at North Oaks, White Bear Yacht Club, Dellwood and Stillwater.

"We could have removed the snow from our greens earlier in the winter, but that would have exposed them to the cold," said Marlin Murphy, the grounds superintendent at Stillwater Country Club, relieved that golfers finally have resumed play on the 12 damaged greens.

"I think about half of our problems came from that early rain and quick freeze and about half came from a mid-February thaw that was followed by another freeze.

"We're fortunate that our members are the type of golfers who voted to

close our greens to give 'em a chance to recover.

St. Cloud Country Club had extensive damage to 17 of its 18 greens, and members there are still putting on temporary greens. The spring thaw-freeze is believed to be the cause.

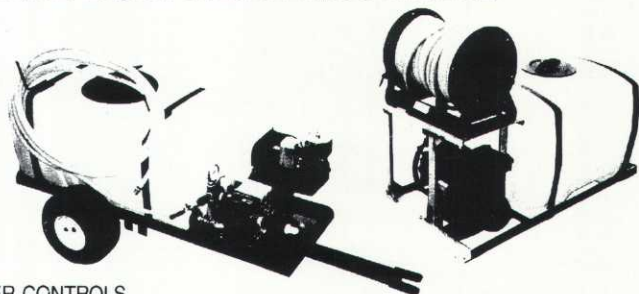
Hastings Country Club escaped nearly all the damage many area courses suffered, but greens superintendent Tom Feriancek isn't crowing.

"I've been where some of these guys are, and it's no fun," he said. "When you escape a winter like the one we just had, there's a good feeling about the condition of the course that you're able to provide for your members. But there's also a sense of relief. There's a feeling you may have dodged a bullet.

"Everybody does the right things to prepare their courses for winter — blanket their greens, spray to guard against snow mold — but no matter what you do, you're still vulnerable."

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