

The Fickle Finger of Fate Strikes Again

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(Editor's Note: The following article is reprinted from the May 1997 issue of Hole Notes.)

The following is an open letter to Minnesota Golf Course Superintendents and Minnesota Golfers in general.

If I was giving this as a talk, I would entitle it: Odyssey of Another Poa Annua Year or The Fickle Finger of Fate Strikes Again.

Many of you are probably asking :“Why me?” “ Superintendents may be feeling like the quest without a wedding garment in the parade” and there will be a weeping and wailing and nashing of teeth in the outer darkness. (Matthew 22:13).

You really shouldn't have to feel like that because the damage that is now becoming evident that poa annua took place, I am sure, at a time when there was nothing you could do about it.

It was just an average year for Minnesota, not like any other we have experienced in recent years. It looked for a while like we were in for it again with poa annua. Many of you alert superintendents discovered ice on your greens and noticed a putrid smell developing in late winter on ice-covered greens.

Whenever that happens you know that some damage has occurred. Sometimes some turf can be salvaged if the ice can be broken so the greens can air out. The standard recommendation is to break up the ice or make it porous with top dressing materials and leave it in place as long as things stay frozen.

With melting or when frost leaves the soil surface, the ice and moisture must be removed as rapidly as possible. No question that this is the best procedure under the conditions. At the same time you have to realize that the putrid odor came from rotting dead grass and the best you could hope for is to salvage what wasn't already dead. Then the weather seemed to give the turf a break by turning warm during the day and cool at night but not

overly so. In fact, the ice went so fast that fear of open greens became a real concern.

Again it looked like we were home with damage, but not devastated. There was enough green color showing on most greens to give hope that things weren't so bad after all.

Unfortunately that now does not seem to be the case. The first few greens I looked at were damaged but looked like they would make it with limited damage. All were situated with good surface drainage. Oh there were some areas on the greens that were worse than others but things didn't look all that bad.

However, as the knotweed germinated about

some thawing and increasing density of the snow surface. Maybe even some free water on the surface. That period was followed by our coldest weather and that is when I think most of the damage occurred. The Poa Annua crowns were most likely hydrated (water uptake) and then frozen resulting in killing. The slow rotting of the dead plants resulted in the putrid odor which built up under the ice. The limited gas exchange caused by the ice and very dense snow also probably added to the problem by increasing the damage. It at least increased damage potential.

Winter, 1996-97

Relatively mild weather, average snow-fall along with accumulation-thawing cycles (even rains again in Feb.) resulted in free water on the ground surface and increasing density of snow at the surface along with ice formation did it again.

The older greens with heavy soils and poor drainage will probably be hit the hardest because that fosters the conditions contributing to “winter kill” of Poa.

I am confident that the damage occurred before you could expect it and at a time when there was really nothing you could do about it.

The courses on sand, with USGA greens and with bentgrass, are the lucky ones. The courses with old greens, heavy soils and Poa Annua are at the mercy of nature, and nature is usually neither merciful or forgiving, just painfully true to its laws.

Well, now that we've got it, what can we do about it?

There are several alternatives open to us besides crying, quitting or dousing yourself with digel. However, everyone and particularly the golfers will have to be patient and understanding while turf becomes reestablished.

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March 30 after several days of 40 degrees weather, greens that looked pretty good as the ice was removed or melted started to lose color. The putrid smell persisted if you handled any plants but was not overpowering. What seemed to be happening was that a lot of the green plants were dead but preserved somewhat until things thawed out. Now the true condition was becoming evident and many poa greens look like they will again be the victims of circumstances.

Let Me Outline What I Think Happened to Your Greens:

Fall, 1996

Snow cover before we had a great deal of frost. Late December early January

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Fate—

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The first consideration is to dry the greens down so they can be reworked and to salvage what remains alive, such as the grass in the aerified holes. Then you may consider the alternatives. Some alternatives are: (1) don't do anything extra and let nature take its course; (2) slice, overseed and top dress; (3) aerify, slice, overseed and top dress; (4) rebuild the green. The very low budget courses may be faced with the first alternative in which case you can expect the Poa will be back and reasonably playable after June 15. Even in this case you're probably better off to at least slice or otherwise break up the mat and scarify the soil surface.

Everyone involved should agree to this before you elect to exercise this option because it may be an unpopular solution.

Most courses should have the manpower and support to do a little more than this minimum. However, everyone should know that it won't be easy and it will take moral support and patience. If everyone maintains a positive and sup-

portive attitude, the time will pass faster and the job will be accomplished in the best manner.

If you have a green or greens that were devastated, I would suggest a thorough renovation. That is aerify, scarify, overseed and top dress. You may overseed with any of the seeded creeping bents:

If your green is heavily thatched and damaged severely you may want to remove the thatch with a sod cutter and re-establish bent on the soil surface.

Penncross for heavy use; Penn Eagle, Emerald or Prominent for 1/4 - 1/2 lb per 1,000 square feet with all but Seaside in which case you can go as high as 1 lb per 1,000 square feet.

You must have good soil contact with the seed in order to expect reasonable results. So aerify first and break the plugs up. If your green is heavily thatched and damaged severely, you may want to remove the thatch with a sod cutter and

re-establish bent on the soil surface.

If you have had the problem before, you can expect it again once out of every 4 or 5 years. Just long enough for the membership to forget. It may be time to consider rebuilding and improving drainage. In that case do what you can now but start the planning so that next fall you can start rebuilding.

Sand top dressing is also sure to receive more attention but unless the poor drainage situation is rectified, it has to be a poorer alternative in converting a green than rebuilding.

In any case, if you have damage, rest assured that there was nothing you could have done about it and dive in to get things going. If you have little or no damage, rejoice that you've got a good situation and support the less fortunate. And rest assured in either case that you are a member of a noble profession that brings enrichment to many lives. So hang in there.

Remember when life serves you lemons, make lemonade and use this as an opportunity to correct your problems and increase the bent population.

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