

REGRASSING FAIRWAYS

Perseverance Affects Change When Contending with Personal Agendas

*By Donnacha Sean O'Connor
Superintendent, Alexandria Golf Club*

My responsibility is to serve the golf course and members, and gain the support needed to make changes that lead to better golfing conditions. By nature, I prefer action to speeches, but also value what communication achieves. I work with my Green Committee to keep them well informed and to gain their support for projects. Attending Board of Directors meetings helps me keep my finger on the pulse of the membership and gives me insight into the agendas of various divisions within the membership. Writing a monthly newsletter and attending General Membership meetings is a great way to keep the membership informed. This is the key to making controversial improvements, but an extended effort may be required.

Personal agendas present the largest obstacle to effecting change. However, I found that demonstrating success is most effective.

When I arrived at Alexandria Golf Club in January 2001, fairway turf had been in decline and the membership was unhappy. The problems causing poor turf quality were many and varied. The fairway grass had a history of being prone to wilting and required nightly watering, with additional syringing each afternoon. Turf loss was an annual event. These poor turf conditions presented a greater challenge than I had faced before. Turf died in my first year, as it had in the years prior to my arrival.

Several factors contributed to the situation. Environmental conditions were poor due to too many trees and no fairway aeration program, and surface compaction was causing irrigation to run off, preventing even wetting of the soil profile. I

established a bi-yearly fairway aeration program. Core aerifying and deep-tine aerification improved infiltration. I installed surface drainage in low-lying areas and implemented a judicious irrigation program. An aggressive tree maintenance/removal and root pruning program reduced competition. Poplar trees lining



many of the fairways had roots encroaching into the fairway - an explanation for where all my irrigation went! Using a vibratory plow to sever the roots along the tree line had a dramatic effect in reducing water usage. I communicated with membership and kept them informed and up-to-date on the changes I was making.

At this point, things were starting to improve as water moved into the soil and was available to the grass. The turf was stronger and required less irrigation. The improved infiltration kept the surface drier and reduced compaction. Golfers saw an improvement in playing conditions, but remained dissatisfied with the playability of the grass on the fairways.

Over the last decade, the fairways were lowered from 1.25" to .75" to meet the increasing demands for better playing conditions, often at the request of the better golfer. The reduction in height and

use of more efficient mowers cut the Blue grass below what it could tolerate. Within three years, there was a transition from Blue grass to a mix with Poa annua. The colonization of the Poa helped maintain a dense turf and this went unnoticed by many golfers, until the Poa went into decline in the hot summer. The decline in

Poa caused a domino effect. In decline, it created voids in the turf canopy that exposed the soil, causing an increase in surface compaction. The compaction made it impossible for new plants to establish. The compaction also affected the soil's ability to take in water and release toxic gasses from the root zone, adding to further decline. Without the density and upright growth of the Poa, the remaining Blue grass assumed a prostrate growth habit. Lateral

growth, preventing other grass from colonizing the surrounding area, further reduced recovery and density.

Remember, you cannot pick a pear from an apple tree and it quickly became apparent that improved maintenance practices would only be part of the story. The fairways now consisted of a mixture of Blue grass, Poa Annua, Rye grass and native Bent grasses. This hodge-podge of grasses was sparse and not uniform. Turf type was now the limiting factor. Our variety of Bluegrass was not capable of creating a quality fairway. At fl" mowing height, the Bluegrass survived by growing below the height of cut. I reduced the mowing height to fi" to cultivate the Poa and native Bent grasses.

In the past, the Blue grass mix had provided a reasonable playing surface. Many

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senior male members recounted the days of old, when the fairways were "great." Those members thought the short cut grass was for the benefit of the low handicap golfer who likes to pinch the ball, rather than sweep it. They also concluded that the reduced mowing height of 1" was increasing the decline in turf. No doubt, the shorter mowing height of 1" had reduced the competitiveness of the Blue grass, but that grass was gone and an increase in height of cut now was not going to bring it back.

The pitfall I failed to avoid was not recognizing the existing friction between high and low handicap golfers; I thought my agronomic reasons for reducing height would stand on their own. As a result, a vocal minority, with nothing but time on their hands, became set against my pro-

gram for change. I failed to convince some that my goal was to improve turf density, not satisfy the demands of the low handicap golfer. By lowering the height of cut to 1" to improve uniformity, I underestimated the impact it would have on high handicap golfers. Educating the members that mowing grass longer would not increase the density of the stand proved to be a most difficult concept to convey.

In September 2001, using Primo growth regulator at .75 oz/1000, we slit seeded #4 fairway with Creeping Bent grass and had a good catch, but the existing turf species prevented strong establishment. We noticed an overall improvement, due to a reduced population of Bluegrass, but not a significant enough improvement to justify the disruption to play.

Spring 2002, members demanded marked fairway improvement and they wanted it quickly. In response, I recommended fairway regrassing with the pos-

sibility of course closure. The membership's uproar reaction to the possible closing of the golf course was deafening. The contingent of senior men, who had decided mowing the fairways short was the problem, vociferously expressed their opinion. The "new Super" had only increased the problem by mowing the fairways even shorter. Seniors continued to associate height of cut with density and wanted it mowed 1" long. This contingent saw my recommendation to regrass with Bent grass cut at a low height as catering to the low handicap golfer. They wanted the regrassing to be done with Blue grass, a grass more friendly to the high handicap golfer. I explained that Blue grass would be difficult to establish and too slow, but they would only hear what fit with their preconceptions.

Summer 2002, we tested plots with Creeping Bent grass, Colonial Bent grass and a low mow Blue grass. The Blue

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grass took several months to establish a good stand of turf, whereas the Bent grasses took only a few weeks. Therefore, for a membership that was looking for fast results, Bent grasses' quick germination and establishment was the only option. We looked at Colonial for the following reasons: it can be mowed higher, has an upright growth habit, and it has a nice pea green color that blends with the native Poa annua. I took my Green Committee to the NTEP Turf Trials on the U of M St. Paul campus to evaluate the same turf down there, and concluded that Colonial was the best fit for the majority of our members. At this point I thought we were on track, because the seniors would see this as a solution that would benefit them too.

My naivety was soon brought to light. The group of senior men, who played almost every day, became known as the Blue grass Faction. The Blue grass Faction would drag turf type into the discussion at every meeting. I repeatedly addressed the purpose of the low mowing practices in articles written for our monthly newsletter. I explained why fairways with less Blue grass had improved, but fairways with a large percentage of Blue grass were our poorest fairways. I gave positive reasons for regrassing with Colonial Bent grass. It was like reasoning with a wall - they were alienated and their minds were closed. In order to move forward, a demonstration was required.

Mid-August 2002, I renovated a 12,000 sq. ft. test area on the front of fairway #5. We killed the existing turf with a non-selective herbicide (Round Up) and over-seeded with Colonial Bent grass. The seed

was quick to germinate, but so was the Poa annua. As anticipated, we got a mix stand of Bent and Poa. However, the two grasses blend very well together and look completely uniform to the untrained eye. Options to eliminate or reduce Poa in a Colonial stand are very limited. Colonial is sensitive to most post-care herbicides, products such as Prograss and Dimension.

The Regrassing Process

- + Communicate intentions and rationale
- + Muster all possible support
- + Spray Round Up on the Fairway
- + Wait 5 days before mowing
- + Scalp the grass as short as possible,
- + Core aerate, about an inch deep and as many holes as possible
- + Pulverize cores and remove thatch
- + Slit seed in three directions with a Verti-seed slit seeder (Charterhouse Redexim) at .5 lbs/1000
- + Spray additional seed at .5 lbs/1000 over the top
- + Drag
- + Water
- + Fertilize

The trial area was open for play in 5 weeks with excellent results. The results were well worth the effort and disruption, so long as the course stayed open, and the surface was more playable for all handicaps. But we were still facing great pressure from members, due to the anticipated disruption of play for any length of time. Some members threatened to go on temporary leave for the duration of the regrassing. The Board of Directors was supportive of fairway regrassing and promptly changed the leave policy for members, requiring medical or extraordinary circumstances.

Summer 2003, our goal was to improve communication with the general membership. We held General Membership meetings specific to fairway regrassing in order to set a more positive tone and educate undecided members. The Blue grass faction was unreasonable during these meetings and deaf to our demonstrated facts. This convinced the majority that it was a decision best left to an expert. In the course of those meetings, we got our message through

and gained the support to overcome the vocal minority. The Grounds Committee recommended finishing #5 and renovating #1 in order to test not closing the golf course. Their recommendation met with Board approval.

Mid-August 2003, #5 and #1 were regrassed. Round Up was used on the #5 fairway. In an attempt to reduce Poa germination, we used Basimid Granular, a soil fumigant on the #1 fairway. The Basimid was applied according to the label instructions. Incorporating the granules into the soil was limited to aerating the fairway, spreading the granules and dragging them into the aeration holes. This was followed by the prescribed irrigation to trap the gas.

The first cut of rough was mowed to fairway height and members moved their ball off and played from there. Both fairways were open for play in six weeks and the results were well received. #1 hole had to be closed for a week while using the Basimid. The process was less controlled than I would have liked. It did reduce Poa germination, but it did not eradicate the Poa. Keeping those facts in mind and weighing in the higher cost, we determined that Round Up was our best solution.

We had confirmed the following: playability improved for all golfers when compared to previous conditions; we did not have to close the golf course at all, and members were not assessed any fees.

Naysayers had been calling for a vote, but without the need for borrowing funds or assessing fees, the Board was not required to do so. The Board stuck to its guns and made the decision, showing tremendous faith in me and in the process we had gone through. The decision was to complete the front nine in 2004 and the back nine in 2005.

This year of 2004, our newly regrassed fairways opened for play after six weeks and are exceeding expectations. Our new fairways are mowed at 5/8" and the majority of the membership is thrilled with the results. Our fairway regrassing project is a success. However, what could have been a straightforward process was held up by personal agendas. A large majority of the Blue grass Faction is very pleased with the outcome of all our efforts and, with only a few exceptions, the general membership is unified in its support for regrassing. It was perseverance and demonstrated success that enabled us to effect change.



A perfect lie.