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Keeping Up to Par

As Golfers Proliferate,
Maintenance of Courses
Gets More Demanding

Specialists Struggle to Grow
Grass Despite Tournament
Crowds, Spikes, Divots

Mollifying the Club Members

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CHICAGO—If your once lush green lawn is now turning brown (and your wife is nagging you to do something about it), take some tips from an expert grass grower:

Your problem might be one of 40 common turf diseases, which Oscar L. Miles of south suburban Chicago is always looking closely for. This year he plans to stray his grass with mixtures of fungicides totaling 4,925 pounds of expensive chemicals.

Or maybe your browning lawn needs more water. Each summer Mr. Miles irrigates his grass with about 31 million gallons, pumped through a 10-mile network of pipes and sprinklers.

Of course, he tends a bit more turf than the average weekend gardener. Mr. Miles is superintendent of two 18-hole golf courses at Olympia Fields Country Club.

He's one of the nation's estimated 5,500 golf course superintendents, whose jobs are part agronomy and part aggravation. Their bosses are dedicated golfers whose own lawns at home could be a tangle of dandelions but who rage if their bobbed putts can be even remotely blamed on a stray blade of grass.

A Chance Remark

Each year many superintendents have their reputations put on the line when their clubs host major tournaments. Then, a chance comment to a sports reporter by a disgruntled pro ("I would've broke par if the greens weren't in such lousy condition") could give their handiwork a nationwide bad press overnight.

Golf course superintendents "are expected to raise laboratory-quality grass under battlefield conditions," says Ben J. Chlevin, executive director of the superintendents' national association. This year some 11 million American golfers, nearly 50% more than five years ago, will tromp around 9,615 golf courses (many smaller, publicly owned courses can't afford a full-time superintendent, which explains why there are fewer superintendents than courses). The golfers will chew up the turf with their spikes shoes and dig it up with their clubs.

To cope with the punishment their grass must take, superintendents have become a highly specialized, professional group. Twenty years ago, when golf wasn't the national craze it is now, superintendents were called greens-keepers, were paid meagerly and had no formal training. Some of them came from farms, while others drifted into the work because they had a green thumb.

A Costly Crop

Today, superintendents are entrusted with growing what's probably the nation's most expensive crop. Many plush country clubs sprawl over land worth \$50,000 or more an acre and in metropolitan areas such as Chicago their superintendents spend upwards of \$100,000 a year to maintain each 18-hole course.

With this kind of money at stake, golf clubs aren't hiring amateurs anymore. Many of the younger superintendents have bachelor's degrees in agronomy or some related subject, and a few hold master's degrees. Many are graduates of special turf management courses offered by a dozen universities around the country.

The new breed of superintendent works with soil tests and chemical analyses instead of intuition. Some are even feeding soil conditions into computers to help determine how much water and what kind of fertilizer to apply and when. Top superintendents are paid up to \$23,000 a year, and some are provided free housing on their course.

Like many of his colleagues, Oscar Miles of Olympia Fields is a golf enthusiast. When he was a teen-ager he considered making golf his career but then chose superintendency because he saw "more potential for advancement" in

grass-growing than on the pro circuit. Now an energetic 30-year old with a sand-colored mustache, Mr. Miles plays his two courses at least twice a week "So I can see how the course is from the golfer's point of view." (He has a seven handicap.)

Thick Grass

Under his watchful eye, his 36-man summer crew (15 are year-round men) mow the club's eight miles of fairway every other day at five-eighths of an inch. He keeps fairway grass growing thick so that golf balls will perch on top of the blades instead of sinking down. That's important because golfers lose a degree of control of their hits if grass or clover comes between the swinging club face and the ball.

Mr. Miles' greens are trimmed early each morning at three-sixteenths of an inch, a much shorter pile than in many living room carpets. The tees are also clipped daily, at three-eighths of an inch, and the roughs are mowed weekly at three inches.

The worst enemy of Mr. Miles' 380 acres of manicured greenery is people's feet. He can control the damage caused by members playing 45,000 rounds a year, but tournaments are major headaches. Last August 80,000 spectators flocked on Olympia Fields' north course for the annual four-day Western Open, and Mr. Miles knew the milling throng, many with spiked shoes on, would trample his grass to death.

Replanting it all after the tournament would take time and interrupt members' play. But Mr. Miles came up with a solution. After the first day of the tournament, he had his men spread grass seed along the crowd's traffic patterns. "The spectators spiked the seed into the ground for me, and all I had to do was water it," recalls Mr. Miles. "Three weeks after the tournament you wouldn't know we had anybody here."

Working with nature is the easiest part of their jobs, the superintendents agree. It's getting along with the club members that can be a strain, which is why some superintendents dream up occasional little extras as public relations efforts. On ladies' day at Sunset Country Club in St. Louis for example, superintendent Robert V. Mitchell sets out potted geraniums at the tees and marks the cups on each green with pink poles holding pink flags trimmed in black lace.

It helps to have a tight rein on tempers, too. One recent Fourth of July the Danville, Ill., Country Club brought in some ponies for members' children to ride. That night somebody tied one pony to the flag on a green. When James W. Brandt, the superintendent, arrived at work the following morning he found the tethered pony had worn a trench in the green by circling the pole all night.

The bad luck award, however, seems to have been permanently retired by Fred Harris, superintendent of the 27-hole Los Coyotes Country Club near Los Angeles. In October 1964, he bought some fertilizer and told his men to put it on a few greens. Unfortunately, when the stuff had been packaged, soil sterilants somehow were mixed in with the nutrients, and every blade of grass on four greens promptly withered and died.

A livid board of directors threatened to fire Mr. Harris, but he proved with soil tests it wasn't his fault. After a long period of litigation involving the fertilizer company and other suppliers, the club was reimbursed for the damage. Meanwhile, it took six months to rebuild the greens.

Then in December of the same year, a mammoth storage tank on a neighboring oil tank farm sprang a leak and sent about 300,000 barrels of crude oil gurgling over five Los Coyotes fairways. The oil company resodded the course, but with soil that had such a high saline content it took Mr. Harris a year to restore the fairways to normal.

The worst most superintendents have to put up with is vandalism, which is increasing despite efforts to increase grounds security. Besides tearing up the sod with drag races or spinning motorcycles, a seemingly favorite bit of vandalism is scratching dirty words deeply into the close-cropped greens. "It always seems to happen just before the ladies' tournament," moans one superintendent.

At one Los Angeles-area course, the superintendent walked out one recent morning to find a green completely stripped of sod. The police quickly nailed the culprit, a nearby homeowner who had decided his yard needed some nice grass. "It was easy to track him down," says a friend of the course superintendent. "All they did was go down the street and look for the best lawn on the block."