

Know Your Place and Stay There!

It has been a while since I updated you on my experiences with golf in Korea. Some of you may get a kick out of this, while a few others, well — I don't really care what the others think.

Upper management appears to be the same, regardless of what country the game of golf is played. To prove it, just read on, unless you are a sensitive upper-level management type.

To set the scene, I was visiting one of our managed courses, a 36-hole resort, during the last week of February. The course features bentgrass fairways and bluegrass roughs. Daytime temperatures were occasionally reaching into the 40's, while soil temperatures were close to 40 degrees, if the sun was shining. The bentgrass turf had yet to awaken, although you could see a little bit of green under the older dead and dormant leaf blades. In short, to the eyes of this knowledgeable agronomist, the turf looked exactly as it should during the final stages of a cold Korean winter.

But to the eyes of upper management, all was not well at this beautiful resort course. From a posh office room inside the palatial clubhouse, where optimal temperatures are regulated by thermostats, came a request to apply fertilizer to make the golf course green. Of course I cannot print my response to my boss when informed of this request, but I think you have an idea what it might have been. Most clubs here employ a director of maintenance as a go-between, so we had to give our response to him. After explaining why a fertilizer application would not help at this time, he relayed this information to upper management. Of course, this was still not good enough. Management continued to insist that we fertilize the golf course so it would be green right away, despite the long-range forecast for several days of snow and ice, and temperatures in the 30's and 40's over the next two weeks.

We continued to lobby our case that fertilizing in these cold conditions would be futile, and believed that the issue had finally been resolved. Four days later, we received a fax at our office from the club's management. By some strange coincidence, a professor teaching classes in soil science and fertilization at a local university, was playing the course and sent a letter to club management with his assessment of course conditions. In his expert opinion, the professor found the golf course to be in serious jeopardy of losing all of its turfgrass. The golf course was extremely dry and needed to be watered immediately, or risk losing all of its turf. Root systems, which should be over three inches at this time of year, were barely two inches in length. The fairways and greens were in dire need of daily irrigation! To illustrate the point, the professor pointed to a lack of ball marks on the greens as proof that they were excessively dry. He also, detailed why we should be fertilizing to promote an early green-up, along with a few other unwarranted comments.

After being informed of the contents of this letter, I was asked by my employer to write a letter of response, explaining why we did not agree with this professor's evaluation of the golf course. Can you imagine how long it took me to calm down enough so that I could write a response? After a little deep breathing, and a walk outside so I could vent, I wrote as civil a letter as possible. For some reason, the Korean people do not like to hear American curse words. I warned my employer that he may have to edit some of the report, as I knew a couple of paragraphs would need to be removed. The paragraphs in question were an honest, accurate expression of my feelings at the time. As you might imagine, my boss removed the offending passages. The report was translated, and sent to club management.

One would have hoped that my report put the issue to rest ... **WRONG!**

A week and a half after the initial request, the other owner of our company was asked to visit the course. This is not just a short drive; it is a one-hour plane flight from Seoul to the facility. With all that had transpired, the owner decided to have a couple Ph.D.'s from the local research facility accompany him so that they could provide an independent evaluation.

After arriving at the facility, everyone toured the course for the evaluation. After the tour, the 50-degree temperature proved too balmy for the group to resist a round of golf. After all, this is Korea, and this golf-crazed culture will play in any conditions, as many of you can attest.

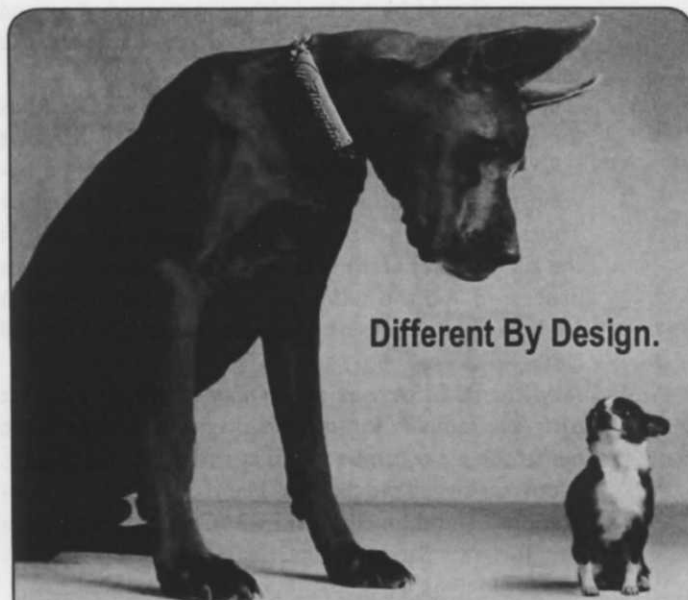
After their visit, the researchers reached the same conclusions I had expressed in my report. Basically, the university professor should be rethinking his career choice, although they voiced their views in a more professional manner.

In summary, air and soil temperatures were too cold to help with early green-up. Fertilization would have been futile under these parameters. The researchers found soil moisture to be more than adequate to support healthy turfgrass, and they were seeing two inches of healthy, white roots. They did not even bother to address the "too dry for ball marks" charge.

The moral of this story is: know your place, stay there, and leave the turfgrass management to the experts you have hired to manage your turf. Even halfway around the world — the basics remain the same.

Written by: Paul E. Masimore, CGCS

PS: If I have offended anyone with this article, I'll tell you what I tell my wife in a loving manner: "you'll get over it". I hope someday to meet this professor. I would love to give him some unsolicited advice. Who would hire this guy? We have a theory or two, but we may never really know. You've got to love it to be in it.



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