

Fairway Verticutting

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The Golf Course Superintendent, as we all know, is not merely the caretaker of the golf course anymore. The fact is that he is the person responsible for providing the most optimum playing surface possible, at least within the boundaries of his budget. In most cases he is responsible for keeping his playing surfaces at least comparable to other clubs or courses in his vicinity.

The 1970's and now in the early 80's have made the term "Keep up with the times" a constant echo in our ears. Everywhere we look there is a superintendent, equipment manufacturer or supplier, chemical purveyor, or university professor showing us how to do things faster, easier and in a way never before dreamed. And in most cases these ideas really work. The standard of maintenance is in reality anything an individual can dream up and make work.

Before we undertake verticutting fairways we must determine what we are looking for in providing the most optimum fairways:

1. Height of cut - short enough that the golfer can get all of the club onto the ball.
2. Turf Density - dense enough that the ball will sit on top of the grass, not in it.
3. Firmness - firm enough that the players can get some roll, and insure no embedded lies.
4. Thatch Level - some thatch, but only enough so wear can be absorbed.
5. Growth Regulation - allow only enough growth to offset wear and quickly heal divots.
6. Freedom from disease and insects.
7. Color that should be somewhat green in appearance.

Proper mowing, irrigating, fertilizing and use of chemicals, we all know will help us to achieve our goal. But, an occasional threat to this goal is a build-up of thatch. Needless to say, a knowledge of a good aeration and/or verticutting program is essential.

The verticut unit we use at Birmingham Country Club is made by the Roseman Mower Company and is interchangeable with their normal fairway mowing unit. There are 18 discs, each with three blades (1 1/2 inches long and 1 1/4 inches wide). For those who are not familiar with Roseman mowers, the reels are hydraulically driven.

At Birmingham Country Club we are using seven units being pulled by a Ford 231 tractor in second gear at 1600 to 1800 rpm. This seems to be an ideal speed on level terrain and fast enough to climb slight inclines, without stalling the engine.

The timing for our verticutting operation was to begin as early as possible in April and continue until early June or hot weather, then resume in early September and continue until mid-October. The frequency of the operation was to do 1 or 2 fairways per day, and then continue until all were completed twice in the spring, and twice in the fall. For the initial operation the units were set as deep into the thatch as we could set them and still effectively be pulled by the tractor. The slice was only 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep. Subsequent operations revealed much less drag, and eventually an adjustment downward was possible.

Again referring to the initial operation, we found it beneficial to verticut in different directions. In fact, as long as there is a substantial amount of thatch it is safe to do so. Subsequent operations have also shown that in areas

where the thatch level had been reduced to acceptable or non-existent levels, the cross verticutting would cause severe damage by ripping and digging the entire grass plant from the turf, leaving a hole. The first verticuttings in the spring and fall tend to produce a very significant amount of debris. Thankfully, in subsequent operations this has proven to be less and less of a problem.

The clean-up is probably the most difficult and time consuming part of the operation. Our approach is to blow the clippings into windrows or into the rough. Once the debris is in the rough or in windrows it is vacuumed and hauled away. The ultimate disposal of this debris can be a very real problem. In our case we pay to have it hauled away, but there has to be a better way.

After two seasons of heavy verticutting my thatch level has significantly diminished. We still have some areas on most fairways where there is still a problem. But, these areas will be gone over heavily for one more year on an individual basis. For the most part the entire operation will go into a light verticutting mode, similar to that of greens maintenance.

The reason to verticut fairways is obvious if you have a severe thatch problem. I am in no way saying or advocating the sale of the fairway aerater. But, I am saying that together, one can help a troubled fairway back to optimum status in a much quicker fashion.

Thatch reduction is not the only benefit of verticutting. Let's take a moment and think back to what vertical mowing has done for putting greens. The fact that every blade of grass is standing straight up. The vigorous growth of new plants provides a much denser turf. This turf is nearly as dense as a putting green. Needless to say, the lie of the golf ball is almost perfect. We have 330 members that will attest to this and I need no more reason than that to continue.

The competition that seems to be more intense every year requires us to put our imaginations to work. We cannot simply expect to do what we do every year without at least watching what the rest of the world is doing. By the same token, not every idea is needed or applicable to every superintendent.

The dollars that our clubs are spending to seek the most optimum playing conditions make it all the more important that we do "Keep up with the times." If you are not, I can assure you that the superintendent at the course down the road is.