

MOWING FAIRWAYS WITH RIDING GREENSMOWERS

Gordon Witteveen
Golf Course Superintendent
Board of Trade Golf Club
Woodbridge, Ontario, Canada

History

In the early seventies we started cutting the aprons around the greens with riding greensmowers. The clippings were removed and spread in the adjacent roughs. A few years later we were experiencing turf damage in front of our greens caused by tight turns of our heavy fairway cutting units. We extended the front aprons in some cases more than 100 feet. We kept on increasing the size of the approaches and were frequently asked by our golfers why the rest of the fairways could not be in as good a shape.

In 1981 we took the bull by the horns and started cutting our #1 fairway on the West Course with Riding Greensmowers. In the spring of 1982 we added four new greensmowers to our fleet of eight and used the oldest four to cut the West Course Fairways.

Which Machine to Choose

During the 1982 Conference in New Orleans we conferred with 6 or 7 of our colleagues from U.S.A. golf courses. All but one of these were using TORO '84's. We opted for the TORO GM III's because our primary consideration was the removal of the clippings. We also felt that the GM III is less noisy, cost less initially and is probably less costly to maintain mechanically. We do use an '84 for cutting long grass around traps and tees but feel that our choice for fairway cutting has proved to be the right one. Of course there is no reason why a Jacobsen Riding Greensmower cannot be used with equal success.

Contouring the Fairways

Reducing the total fairway area has been our objective for many years. Prior to the greensmowers' appearance on the fairways, our total fairway area was 25 acres. By means of contouring and by establishing a 15 foot strip of semi fairway, we have reduced our total fairway area to less than 17 acres.

We used aerosol spray cans for the first four weeks until the fairway outline had been established. During the entire season we only had to implement two minor modifications.

Methods of Mowing

The direction of cut on the fairways is changed frequently, but it is not as critical as it is on the greens. We usually cut along the diagonal, e.g. at 45° angle to the direction of play. This angle can be increased to 60° or 70° if there are few golfers but when play increases during midday and in the afternoons, the direction of cut is at right angles to the fairway. This way there is minimal interference with golf.

Clipping Disposal

From an agronomic point of view, we like to remove the clippings from the fairways and we use baskets on our mowers. Only once or twice did we cut without baskets during the past season. We then used a large fairway blower to remove the clippings and blew them onto the adjacent rough.

The greensmower operators scatter the clippings in the roughs by emptying the baskets with a sweeping motion. They are encouraged to spread the clippings well and to leave no clumps of grass. We usually run the rough mowers over these areas which helps to spread the grass still further. During the past year we have had neither oral nor written complaints about the presence of clippings on the rough.

Cultural Practices

Aerifying and topdressing are now an integral part of our fairway maintenance program. The problem was that we initially had to learn to do both operations on a much larger scale.

To topdress a fairway we employ a Lely Fertilizer Spreader with the feeder ring removed and the throw arms shortened. The spreader is towed behind a single axle dump truck. Four strong persons very quickly shovel sand from the truck into the spreader while it is being slowly driven across the fairway. It takes 2 hours and approximately 25 tons of sand to do one par-four fairway. During the 1982 season we did ten fairways. The cost of sand at \$4.50 per ton was not the prohibitive factor. But it was rather difficult to have four strong persons available at any given time. The benefits of the sand topdressing became quickly noticeable. Sand smoothens the playing surface and it certainly helps control thatch.

We aerified ten fairways during early August using the Ryan Greensaire. This operation brought a lot of topsoil to the surface, which we matted in and in essence this is an excellent topdressing material. However, the operation was not totally successful. The condition of the turf actually deteriorated. We had forgotten what an old time Greenkeeper told us many years ago. "You hurt the grass when it is strong, not when it is weak". Our mostly Poa annua fairway turf is at its strongest during late June and early July and at its weakest during August. We finished the aerifying operation in September and October using the larger fairway aerifier. In 1983 we plan to aerify selected fairways in June.

Disease Prevention and Control

In 1981 we applied six chemical sprays to our fairways for prevention and control of Dollar Spot, Fusarium and Anthracnose. In 1982 on both our East and West Course we only used chemicals three times. 1982 was a relatively easy year to grow grass. There were few extremes in temperatures and humidities and the going really never got tough. We suspect, however, that since our turf is healthier, there will be less need to apply chemicals for disease control. In the future we anticipate substantial savings in this area. One spray application can easily cost as much as \$4,000.

Costing

In 1982 we employed three extra persons on our Greens Staff for the duration of the Growing Season. We budgeted for \$14,000 in extra wages. Our forecast was correct.

Conclusions

There are two important considerations when cutting with riding greensmowers. One is the golfer and the other the greenkeeper. The golfer wants short clipped fairways, which will give him a tight lie and enables him to impart lots of spin to the ball. The greenkeeper wants a healthy turf, free of thatch and free of clippings. The riding greensmower satisfies both expectations. It is our firm belief that the removal of clippings is the single most important benefit of cutting fairways with greensmowers. The silage effect, the continuing build-up of grass clippings and their subsequent fermentation is eliminated. A healthier turf results. Just like we have learned to grow homogeneous stands of bentgrass on our greens by cultural means, so too the time will come, when Poa annua on our fairways will be just as rare as it is on our Greens at present.