



Managing Winter Play - Why Can't We Tee Off Now?

Frost delay, course closed due to thawing greens, and course closed due to covered greens are all phrases that golfers eager to play during the winter dread hearing. Behind the decision to close or limit access to a golf course lies a conflict between what is good for turf and what is good for golf. This conflict arises most often during times of the year – e.g., winter – when allowing golf traffic can damage turfgrass playing surfaces that are not actively growing. The key to maintaining a good balance between what is good for golf and what is good for turf lies with an understanding of how turfgrasses respond to changes in the environment during winter and applying the information to scenarios that arise as golf course decision makers manage winter play.

Turf Growth Changes as Temperatures Change

An amazing characteristic of turfgrass plants is the ability to recover from the stresses that result from playing golf – particularly traffic stress. However, the recuperative ability of turfgrasses reduces when temperatures fall below the ideal ranges for active turf growth. Turfgrass growth and recuperative ability may completely stop if the temperature gets low enough, leaving playing surface particularly vulnerable to damage. Furthermore, the climate is less conducive to maintaining desired playing quality when slow-growing turf is coupled with higher seasonal precipitation rates during the winter that cause wet soil conditions in many areas. These conditions set the stage for a slow start to turf recovery when conditions improve in the spring.

Decisions to Make

There are a number of scenarios related to winter play that occur every year throughout the country. Decision makers at golf courses need more than a theoretical understanding of turfgrass science; they need to apply turfgrass science to scenarios, assess risks, and make decisions that balance the demands



of play with the needs of turf. When managed incorrectly, winter play can cause acute damage that appears immediately or cumulative damage that shows up over time. However, because many winter play-related scenarios commonly occur annually, it is possible to implement some preventative measures to help reduce disruption to golf.

Common issues faced by golf course decision makers when managing winter play include:

- Play on slow-growing or nongrowing playing surfaces
- Play on frosted playing surfaces
- Play on frozen playing surfaces
- Play on thawing playing surfaces
- When to remove and/or replace covers

Conclusion

It is inevitable that golf will be disrupted at some point during the winter. Trust that the decision makers at your course have taken the facts into account and applied them to the unique conditions at your course. Managing turf is not a sprint but rather a marathon. Appropriate winter management ensures minimal turf damage and promotes better year-round playing conditions.