

# Using a soft hammer to educate members

**E**ach year when he meets his new greens committee, Keith Ihms schedules a "getting-acquainted" luncheon to discuss past and future maintenance activities. He follows the luncheon with a tour of his maintenance shop and introduces the committee to his staff, including "the guy who runs the weed eater."

As golf course superintendent at Bent Tree Country Club just north of Dallas, Ihms embraces a grassroots approach to member relations.

"Most of the time, members really want to help, but just don't have the background to understand what we're doing," says Ihms, who's been at Bent Tree two years. "By working up front with the committee and members, fewer people get aggravated. Since the committee changes each year, over a period of time a big percentage of the membership will be well-versed in maintenance procedures. My pro, David Price, is very supportive, too."

**Bent Tree has water features on 80 percent of its holes, including number 18. Numerous lakes, five circulating fountains and two waterfalls all come into play. ▼**



▲ Keith Ihms, CGCS: Members bring guests to the club at the times they know it will look and play its best.

Besides his monthly meetings with the greens committee, Ihms writes articles for the club newsletter explaining his activities and posts spray, trimming and fertilization schedules on the bulletin board near the pro shop.

He also uses posters available through the GCSAA to explain procedures such as aerification and overseeding, filling in the dates he plans to perform the tasks. "This way, no one gets embarrassed by bringing a guest to the club the day we aerify or the week we overseed," Ihms notes.

Ihms supervises a summer staff of 22, including an assistant for the golf course and an assistant for the clubhouse landscape crew. In addition to a gardener, mechanic, spray technicians and irrigation technicians, he employs three "greens checkers" who do nothing but monitor water levels on greens seven days a week from June through September.

"It's these kinds of specialized activities that most members don't have any knowledge of," Ihms notes. "That's why an educational program is the best way to create a better relationship between club members and the maintenance staff. For the most part, my membership knows what we're trying to do and how we're doing it. They bring guests to

the club at the times they know it will look and play its best."

#### Disease woes

With water features on 80 percent of its holes, Bent Tree suffered from the dry weather of the summer of 1995. The course design by Dick Nugent features numerous lakes, five circulating fountains and two waterfalls. Its signature hole—number 14—is a stunning par three incorporating an elevated teeing area on top of a cliff overlooking a green that is surrounded by water. Though natural tributaries of White Rock Creek move through both the front and back nine holes, the course still buys city water to fill the supply lakes.

"We were able to keep the fountains and waterfalls running," says Ihms. "But our disease pressure was pretty intense because of the weather. We're on a preventive spray program on greens for both surface and root pythium, brown patch, leaf spot and dollar spot. Take-all patch has begun showing up on a few Dallas courses recently, too. So we stay on a







Bent Tree has 419 bermudagrass fairways and tees, such as number 15. Last year, Ihms skipped overseeding in an effort to clean up *Poa annua*. 'Our bermuda went dormant, but it never went totally off-color last year because of the weather,' superintendent Keith Ihms notes.

fungicide rotation from mid-June through mid-September."

Root pythium affected four of Bent Tree's greens last year. The lab that made the diagnosis recommended a thorough drenching with Koban, with follow-up treatments of Fore and Aliette. Then a preventive regime of Banol was followed the rest of the year.

"Root pythium is just as devastating as surface pythium," says Ihms. "It can be deceiving because you get thinning of turf in the summer anyway. But when you start losing color, too, you take notice. Root pythium can destroy large areas of turf very quickly."

"Once we had initial knockdown of the disease and began a beefed-up preventive program, we didn't have a recurrence before the weather broke in September. When we aerify this spring, I'll use a heavy rate of the Banol to clean up whatever disease may still be there."

Fairy ring also affected small areas last summer. In the past, Ihms merely masked the circular patches of darker green turf by keeping fertility levels high and hand-watering the selected areas. But he tested

ProStar fungicide under an Experimental Use Permit a few years ago and liked it.

"We solid-tine aerified the areas affected with fairy ring...before using ProStar...to make sure we got good contact with the diseased tissue," says Ihms. "Then we used a wetting agent to get the product flushed into the ground; that's the real key. Fairy ring no longer causes major problems for us."

#### Lots of turf aerification

In addition to solid-tine aerifying selected areas, Ihms core-aerifies greens twice a year and uses a Toro Hydroject biweekly during the summer months. This year, he plans to employ a deep-drill aerification unit to enhance root development with less disruption to the turf. Though six greens were rebuilt to USGA specs in 1992, the rest are the original greens built in 1972. Compaction concerns led Ihms to find an alternative aerification method.

In general, though, Ihms follows an IPM approach. He monitors insect populations until they reach high levels before treating. He also maps grub populations, treating only those areas with known infestations. For weed control, Ihms plans to

switch to a post-emergence program once he becomes familiar with which areas of the course have specific problems.

"Even our fungicide program is an IPM approach. We don't start until weather conditions dictate disease pressure, and then we only spray every 7 to 10 days. Plus, we use a curative spray program the rest of the year. We also use a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer, which promotes microbial activity and allows us to make fewer applications."

#### Waiting out the weather

By March 25th, Ihms was getting the greens ready for the aerification/soil amendment program. He wants 60 days of root development before the summer heat kicks in.

"We've had some cold weather that's delayed our deep-drill aerification," Ihms reports. "We didn't want to drill when the weather was uncertain. We might not have been able to fill in the holes quick enough. We want to let the cold spells blow through and then go in with soil amendment products. The deep-drill will also help the greens to percolate."

Ihms also plans to flush excess sodium out of the greens with a granulated gypsum product.

"The gypsum can help decrease the base saturation rate, as it allows sodium particles to break off and flush through," says Ihms. "It's critical here, with the water quality, and it's been dry weather over the summer (of 1995) fall and winter."

As a final preparatory step, Ihms wants to steady the soil's calcium-to-magnesium ratio.

"We're trying real hard to get the calcium/magnesium ratio to where it should be, which is 8:1," Ihms explains. To do that, he uses a product called Sul-Po-Mag.

"We're trying to keep base saturation for sodium below two percent. We're at 1.5 percent right now," Ihms says. □