

# 1995 in retrospect:

## Wet, blistering summertime pushed golf turf to limit

by TOM JOHNSON / Contributing Editor

**W**hen LM asked golf course superintendents what kind of year 1995 was, they had plenty to say about what the weather did to turf. There was extreme heat in the North, and plenty of rain in the South and East. Here's what supers tell us about the summer of 1995:

### Northern Illinois

In suburban Chicago, the searing heat that killed 700 in July led Les Rutan of the Beverly Country Club to call it "the most miserable growing season I can remember."

The club, however, sees just 17,000 to 20,000 rounds over a seven-month season, so "we're not in the same predicament with a course putting down 40,000 or more rounds," Rutan says. The grass survived, but *Poa annua* took hold of the fairways.

"Theoretically, you want to remove as much of it as you can, using growth regulators and trying not to pamper it," he says.

Rutan credits the course's survival to the benefits of a five-year growth regulator program on the greens plus aggressive irrigation. "Even so, we took a hit on the fairways. We couldn't keep up with it, especially where old trees inhaled what moisture there was available."

### Michigan

Stephen C. Rose, who manages 45,000-rounds-a-year Flint Elks Country Club, agrees. His course isn't trying to root out the poa. "It's not a bad grass," he says. "When it's your predominant grass, 80 percent, you better try to grow it. It melts out in the heat, but it comes back fast," he says. "We're not a high budget club. We hope for the best, fertilize and water and hope Mother Nature can make it back."

At the height of the heat wave and drought, Rose and his crew went to deep-aeration drilling once a month on the greens. "We went down eight to ten inches to get down through our hard soil layer. I firmly believe that if we hadn't done that, we would have lost the good half of our front nine greens. If you couldn't get the water off the course, it would have started to bake."

### Wisconsin

"We were dry all summer, then in August we got the rain, heat and humidity," remembers Steve Schmidt, superintendent of the Butte Des Mortes Country Club in Appleton, Wis. The result was turf disease. "Guys got their chemical budgets blown out of the water, because they didn't have much choice.

"We had a day here on July 13 that sent the temperature to 103° F., the dew point to 89 and the heat index to 145," he recalls.

Schmidt's fairways are a combination of poa and bent, and the poa isn't entirely welcome. "I try to control it, but because it's on the golf course I have to try to maintain it." He uses turfgrass growth regulators, and keeps compaction down with light-weight mowing.

He Hydrojects his greens three to five times a year, and core aerates once in the fall to relieve compaction and allow better air and water movement. The practice allows him to interface his top dressing program with his original push-up greens.

### Southern Illinois

Superintendent Jim Van Ravenswaay manages the grounds at the private, 20,000-round Illini

Country Club in Springfield. He calls 1995 weather "miserable. We lost some low areas and fairways the second week of August, but we kept the greens and tees."

The weather prevented serious problems for Van Ravenswaay when chemical controls began to break down fast, ahead of time.

The night before the Illinois State Amateur tournament, disaster struck. "We had a three-inch rain followed by 115 degree temperatures the day of the competition. That's when the turf went," he recounts, drily.

#### **Kentucky**

Larry Hantle of The Country Club of Paducah, though, came up aces. "We had a very beautiful spring, but it got a little wet in May." He's not complaining. In southern Indiana and Illinois, just 60 to 70 miles away, it was common for courses to record 12 to 15 inches in May. One southern Illinois course had 20 inches that month.

#### **Carolinas**

Dr. Bruce Williams, an agronomist with the North Carolina State Cooperative Extension Service, had a precise fix on what kind of a summer it had been for the grounds crews. "Dry spring, rains in May, coolish June," he says. "A lot of the [perennial ryegrass] overseeded into bermuda persisted, and folks who had overseeded golf greens had a difficult time with that."

The trouble started in earnest in October. "Some courses had more than 20 inches of rain, and their seed washed away," he relates. Poa, which he described as "a real problem down here," flourished in the October deluge. Then came November, with an earlier-than-normal frost. Temperatures didn't cooperate. "People seeding bent are finding poor root development," he observes. In December, he says, bermuda was dormant three weeks early.

#### **Maryland**

From July 3 to September 1, rainfall totaled  $\frac{1}{10}$ th of an inch, and the temperature hovered in the mid-90s at Turf Valley Resort and Conference Center in Lutherville, Md.

Michael J. Gilmore's crews struggled with gray leaf spot disease. In the end, 40 acres of rye were gone, fairways and tees. "We were struggling to stop it," he says. "We overseeded our fairways three times last fall and got eaten up." They quit in October.

Gilmore controls his poa problem with a turf growth regulator program, which he says does a good job of helping the bentgrass push through. In a normal year's program, they Hydroject greens once every three weeks and aerate three times a year, in April, August and November.

#### **South Florida**

September and October storms drenched the state after a tranquil summer. Carlos McKeon, superintendent of The Links at Key Biscayne, notes that "it was very difficult, rainwise."

Damp conditions forced McKeon to deal with fungus problems. "We raised the height of the cut on the

mowers, and we stayed with pesticide application on a preventive basis. We don't use it unless we have to." The crew used liquid fungicides to attack the pythium and rhizochtonia, his main problems, along with algae. For algae: "We try to keep the grass growing, because the algae grows when there's space," McKeon explains.

#### **Nevada**

Maybe the place to go is Nevada, where Collier Miller, superintendent of the Tournament Players Club at Summerlin, Las Vegas, observes, "It's tough to keep moisture in the ground." With his caliche rock base, "you need a pick to take a soil sample out of the fairway," he says, adding, "Plays firm, putts fast." □

*Jim Van Ravenswaay:*  
*'You just have to hope and pray and do everything agronomically that you can think of.'*

## Dealing with boards and greens chairmen

In a disastrous weather year like 1995, how do golf course superintendents deal successfully with country club boards and greens chairmen unhappy over less-than-ideal course conditions? Tell them the truth:

*Rutan* — "Be honest with them. Try to give them the best playing conditions that you can—and don't turn your backs on the greens for a minute."

*Rose* — "We try to take care of problems as soon as we can. They understand we have a low budget. If we had an unlimited budget it might be different."

*Schmidt* — "The only way I have found is: (1) always remember it belongs to them; and (2) make sure your communications are always there, no matter how small the problem, so that they don't get any surprises."

*Hantle* — "The easiest way to keep them happy is to do a good job. Present the course as if you owned it yourself. Make yourself happy with it, and usually everyone else is happy."

*McKeon* — "Do the best job you can, and let the ball fall where it falls. In this business, you can only do so much and you run into problems with nature, or with budget.

"[Members] try to hear you, but they're simply not communicating—it's even hard to get the concept of seeding over to them."

*Gilmore* — "Always tell them the truth. Be prepared to answer questions, and know where to go to look for answers if you don't know." □