

The sun does shine, after all

Winter's officially over, thank goodness. Now, for your own peace of mind, remember that it's more how you feel about what you do than what you do.

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

Call the winter long, harsh, cold, mean and nasty. Call a handful of golf course superintendents angry, shaken, perturbed, disgusted and scared.

But, as spring was breaking, Alan Culver was the picture of serenity. The GCSAA-certified superintendent at Mahoney Golf Course in Lincoln, Neb., was looking forward to the 1996 season with unbridled enthusiasm.

"The last 12 months have been the harshest I've ever seen," says Culver. "We had two months of non-stop rain last spring, followed by two months of absolute heat and blowtorch-type winds that caused ryegrass and bluegrass to go dormant. Then, we had a -50° wind chill factor in the fall that didn't give the grass a chance.

"Last night (April 28th) was the first decent rain of more than one inch that we've had since last June.

"You could fire every superintendent in Nebraska and the greens wouldn't have been any greener. Even the guys who have been around longer than me (20 years) have dead grass."

Culver was luckier than most, though an astute observer might add "smarter." Mahoney was ready for the spring onslaught of golfers, even though the course lost about 10 percent of its tees and fairways, and about 35 percent of its bluegrass/ryegrass roughs, which never came out of dormancy.



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Helping the grass

"There are certain things that we do religiously in the fall that helped our greens survive the winter," he says. "We give them a real heavy sand topdressing to where just the tips of the grass show and the crowns are covered. We also require 'Soft Spikes' from Nov. 15 to April 15 so we don't get damage from normal spikes on frozen greens."

This spring, 4000 lbs. of bluegrass/ryegrass seed went down on the course. Next comes spring deep-tine aerification to 9-10 inches. The greens will be overseeded again with the fall aerification.

"Most of what died around here was on exposed ground. Compared with other courses, our problems were minor. Some of the newer courses with bentgrass fairways really took a hit."

The bright side

Culver's positive outlook comes from activities that divert his mind from the job's problems, and the excitement that comes from planning and executing new projects.

"It might be a hard job, but I love what I do," Culver admits. "But you've got to have some escapes. If the job is the only thing you've got, it'll drive you nuts."

His "escapes" are three: playing golf; spending time with his wife Jan, daughter Jennifer, 24, son Justin, 16, and six horses on a 20-acre farm; and interacting with his peers. He's an officer of the local superintendents' association.

"We get together and play golf once a week, what we call our 'travelling circus.' All the courses and country clubs and private people: superintendents, their assistants and sometimes crew members. Terry Riordan and Roch Gaussoin (turf faculty at the University of Nebraska, just down the road) come out, too, and every fall we have a tournament/supper with them and their students."

Rarin' to go

He's involved in two special projects this summer: planting prairiegrass (little bluestem, big bluestem and switchgrass) in out-of-play areas that don't require a lot of mowing; and installing a new \$500,000 double- and triple-row irrigation system "to help avoid the fairways getting toasted like they did last summer."

"Getting the new irrigation system is something I look forward to, because I didn't have a lot of experience when we put our first one in, back in 1975. I've shopped around. In Lincoln, the courses use a combination of two brands and four different computer-controlled systems, all less than five years old."

Aqua Engineering of Fort Collins, Colo., is designing an electric valve-in-head, computer-driven, state-of-the-art system for the course. "I'll be like a little kid in a candy store," Culver notes. "I'd like a radio-controlled system because then you can control any head on the course from your hand, and flow control so the pumps run as efficiently as possible."

The last two years, water for irrigation cost \$60,000. Culver is convinced computer-based irrigation will reduce that. He's also convinced that the new system will free up most of the 10 to 15 hours a week his crews normally spend on irrigation repair. "Hopefully, it'll be a phased-in installation in the fall and we'll pull as much pipe as possible so that we don't have to trench the fairways and make a mess. Play shouldn't be interrupted. We'll also have water on the driving range for the first time." □


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