An impossible turfgrass growing environment openly invites problems for the golf course superintendent and golfers alike!

Looking at a Bad Year in a Good Light

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IT NEVER FAILS! Sometime during a long and difficult golf season, Green Section agronomists find themselves prefacing Turf Advisory Service reports to clubs that lost turf with phrases such as “If there is anything good to be said about a bad year . . .” or “It should be no surprise the grass died . . .” These sentiments reflect that there are literally hundreds of golf courses that are openly inviting turf-related problems. That is, they have certain problems or conditions that predispose them to turf loss.

The problems may be as simple as inadequate or improperly timed aerification or renovation work (sometimes referred to as deferred maintenance). Or, the problems may be so severe that the solutions would require large expenditures, such as those involving large irrigation or drainage projects or putting green construction. In any given year some golf courses fare poorly, and often it’s the weather that triggers the turf-related problem. To complete an earlier phrase, “If there is anything good about experiencing a bad year, it is that both the strengths and weaknesses of the golf course and its management programs are clearly exposed. They are often exposed in such a way that it is difficult to ignore them!”

It is easy to ignore fundamental problems with a turf management program in mild years, since those are years when most turf areas perform reasonably well despite the inherent deficiencies. Golfers are happy and even complimentary towards the superintendent’s handiwork. Those are years when Green Committee members don’t attend the scheduled Turf Advisory Service visit.

We all know what happens in the tough year, though. Golfers are sure that theirs is the only course in the area that is experiencing problems, and a group of five to ten concerned, anxious, and sometimes hostile members arrives at the superintendent’s office a full half hour before the scheduled Turf Advisory Service visit! All demand immediate answers and immediate solutions.

Unfortunately, it is easy for superintendents to become too defensive when
this type of scenario occurs. Course officials tend to go head-hunting, and superintendents respond with a sharp "I told you so!" Neither approach to the problem is very productive, and bad feelings, or employment ads, will probably occur at the expense of improvements in the golf course. A positive approach should be taken instead, preventing the member/superintendent relationship from degenerating into an adversarial one. Hard work and good communication is required on both sides to avoid slipping into this self-defeating cycle.

It is important to remember that golf course superintendents dislike seeing their turf fail even more than the golfers do. Seriously, have you heard of a superintendent cheering when a green died? Most would do almost anything to keep that from happening. All should cooperate to achieve their common goals.

Though golf course superintendents are not infallible, turf-related problems often are not a result of the superintendent suddenly "getting stupid." In many instances, courses enjoy several successful years, and the golfers become complacent about the maintenance program or greedy with the golf schedule. The result is the same in both cases: The agronomic health of the course declines and the turf becomes more susceptible to failure.

Often, the disastrous consequences, so visible on the golf course, were actually predicted by the superintendent or Green Section agronomist, but the warnings were ignored or dismissed as "complaining" or "crying wolf." Most golfers probably were never aware of them. On the other hand, it is tough to ignore those same warnings when various portions of the golf course are dead, dying, or unplayable. The superintendent and the green committee will have all the golfers' attention when the condition of the course is at its worst.

This is the time to make the best of a bad situation and take a difficult year and turn it to your advantage.

Consider the following case studies:

**Hunkeydory Country Club**

Hunkeydory Country Club received a Turf Advisory visit in August 1990 and the report essentially stated that even though the course was in fine condition, problems eventually would occur due to several factors. The club had an antiquated irrigation system that functioned poorly and was undependable. It also had a tremendous population of large trees which lined the fairways and surrounded the greens and tees. To cap things off, a large percentage of the turf on the course was Poa annua, increasing the likelihood of suffering turf loss. In short, this golf course was a time bomb waiting for the right meteorological events to trigger the explosion.

Unfortunately, the majority of members had no idea these problems existed. Many were surprised when the explosion came in 1991 after an extended period of heat and drought put intense pressure on the irrigation system and the Poa annua. As predicted, extensive turf loss occurred. The solution involved an extensive tree pruning and removal program, a new irrigation system, and a regrassing program for affected areas of the course. The solutions had been suggested the previous year but were considered too radical and had not even been presented to the membership.
The greens at Wecanneverdothat (We-can-never-do-that) Country Club were built from dense, poorly drained native soils, yet the golfers were unwilling to consider any turf recommendations that entailed disruption to their course. Consequently, neither vigorous cultivation nor regular topdressing was permitted. The course was never closed for essential maintenance, and green speeds were expected to be kept above 9 feet at all times. Vital renovation work was pushed back later into the fall months each year. Unfortunately, Wecanneverdothat Country Club slipped into a vicious cycle of turf loss as it suffered severe damage for several consecutive years. The golfers were beside themselves with frustration and anger.

The problems were easy to analyze. The late fall renovation work and compacted, poorly drained soils promoted Poa annua encroachment. The result was an incredibly good environment for disease and stress problems. Once the problems were thoroughly explained, the golfers at Wecanneverdothat Country Club found the prospect of an appropriate cultivation and soil modification program more palatable. They even agreed to abandon their deferred maintenance program and adjust their golf schedule to permit late August renovation work.

The moral of these stories is that great progress can be the result of a disastrous year or years if a good plan of attack is devised and carried out. In these two cases, the loss of turf was so devastating and the solutions were so painfully obvious that the golfers were rather easily convinced to proceed. Other times, problems are more difficult to identify and solutions are less clear-cut.

What can be done to avert the gloomy fates just described? The first step is to take an offensive approach rather than a defensive one. Act — don’t wait to react. Call in appropriate consultants and begin a fact-finding mission. The Green Section is an excellent place to start. Analyze the course’s strong points as well as its weak ones. Look for potential problems in the water management systems, including irrigation and drainage, since failure here guarantees turf loss. Examine the growing environment around greens and tees. What is the air circulation like? Are trees becoming a problem? Is the majority of turf the best-suited species or variety? Does your turf have a reasonable chance for survival if the weather becomes unfavorable? All of these questions have to be answered before a plan of attack can be devised.

The golfers also must be kept well informed. New programs are more readily accepted by those who understand why failures occurred and what is being done to prevent them from recurring. They should be made to feel a part of the decision-making process. Do not be surprised if the problems are fairly complex and cannot be solved by a single solution. Usually, a variety of factors are involved. Do not fall into the trap of looking for a painless (low cost/ non-disruptive) solution to your course’s problems. It is very rare for a single piece of equipment, soil additive, growth enhancer, pesticide, etc. to turn a program around. Severe problems rarely develop overnight, and solutions require time, funding, and patience to work effectively.

In short, do not wait for disaster to strike; anticipate it. If disaster has already struck, use it to help institute the necessary corrective programs. Don’t be afraid to look at a bad year in a good light and use it to the course’s advantage.