

APPROACHES: A Key Part of the Golf Course

Firm, smooth approaches require specific maintenance inputs to address unique issues.

BY ADAM MOELLER



Above left: Approaches with wide entrances to putting greens do not necessarily make a golf hole easier. Rather, players of all levels are provided the option to fly the ball to the green or run it up on the surface. Above right: Topdressing approaches regularly with sand will aid in thatch control and improve surface firmness and smoothness.

The condition of putting greens has long been at the forefront of golf turf management, and rightly so, given that greens play a role in well over half of all strokes in a round of golf (Beard, 1982). After the putting greens, however, what is the next most important playing area on the golf course? I would contest that approaches are one of the most overlooked areas that are extremely important to how a golf course plays. For instance, one can hit a variety of shots to a green, but sometimes a bump-and-run shot is most appropriate. Pitch shots around the greens are also largely influenced by the condition of the approaches. When playing to a front hole location or to a green that slopes from front to back, a soft approach will force you to land your pitch shot on the putting surface, and all but the best shots are likely to end up on the back of the green. A firm approach gives you the option to bounce the ball onto the green and likely is the most reliable strategy to get close to the hole loca-

tion. A firm, smooth approach will also allow players to putt from the approach in this situation. These are two common examples of why the performance of the approaches should not be an afterthought. Unfortunately, turf management inputs are sometimes lacking on approaches, which leads to poor playability, especially for players who recognize the value of the ground game. In addition to maintenance, other factors that impact conditions on approaches include drainage, irrigation coverage, and contours. This article will outline some common problems observed with approaches in the Northeast and outline the best management practices to produce firm, smooth surfaces.

CONTOURS

It is always interesting to see how golf courses evolve over time. Putting greens often shrink and become more circular, fairways and teeing grounds fall out of alignment, and bunkers become contaminated, lose their original

shape, and develop higher mounds from sand being blasted onto the slopes. In the Northeast, approaches often narrow to an hourglass shape and become soft and spongy from excessive thatch accumulation. Narrowing of approaches sometimes is a planned change to “add challenge and strategy” to the approach shot. In most instances, however, narrow approaches only serve as a punishment to high-handicap players or anyone who chooses to utilize the ground game with bump-and-run shots. This narrowing may also lessen the likelihood of bunkers and hazards coming into play. A thick band of rough between the approach and the hazard will prevent balls from running into the hazard. Often the only way a ball finds these hazards is if it flies into it. Visually, narrow approaches with wide rough areas between the hazards make them much less intimidating. Recapturing approach contours can be accomplished with sodding or scalping the turf down followed by intensive over-



Landing the golf ball on firm approaches short of the putting green to allow it to run onto the surface is sometimes the best strategy for playing the hole.

seeding, or a combination of the two. Finalizing the mowing contours can be done “in-house,” and old aerial photographs can be especially helpful. A golf course architect may also be of value when adjusting contours.

FIRMNESS

Soft conditions often develop on approaches as a result of several factors. Lightweight mowing and limited traffic in the center of approaches creates a favorable environment for creeping bentgrass, the preferred turfgrass species for these areas in the Northeast. The Achilles heel of creeping bentgrass, however, is prolific thatch accumulation, which contributes to soft surfaces. Inadequate core aeration, verticutting, topdressing, or excess fertilization combined with high amounts of creeping bentgrass are often the most common factors contributing to excessive thatch and soft approaches. *Poa annua* (annual blue-

grass) and perennial ryegrass are the other species commonly found in these areas, neither of which produces a great deal of thatch. However, *Poa annua* has poor stress tolerance, and both species are highly susceptible to many diseases, compared to creeping bentgrass.

Water management also plays a major role in soft conditions and excessive thatch in approaches. In the Northeast, approaches are almost always built with native soils that generally drain poorly. Adding to the problem, surface drainage from putting greens and fairways often is funneled to approaches. Overwatering is another common problem because automatic irrigation coverage from greens, fairways, and surrounds overlap on approaches. When soils are wet, soil oxygen levels are reduced. The result is less microbial degradation of organic matter, which in turn leads to more thatch accumulation.

MANAGEMENT

There are several management practices that should be used to improve firmness and thatch control on approaches. Approaches are an extension of the greens in many ways, so they should be of like firmness. For this to happen, approaches should have a similar thatch management program. Some approaches may require a more intensive cultivation program than greens since thatch development is increased in turf with a higher mowing height. Core aeration may need to be performed twice seasonally with large-diameter (e.g., 5/8-inch) tines on close spacing, preferably with walk-behind aeration equipment. Harvesting the soil cores and backfilling aeration channels with sand is ideal. Regular sand topdressing applications made every three to five weeks at effective rates, usually three to four cubic feet per 1,000 square feet, can be very beneficial. Aggressive

verticutting, such as with the walk-behind Graden, will also be helpful to keep thatch at a reasonable level. Effective thatch control programs are usually a combination of all of the above practices, and they will work if implemented regularly.

Addressing poor automatic irrigation coverage to limit overwatering could require something as easy as replacing irrigation heads or as complex as completely redesigning the spacing to minimize coverage overlap. Increasing hand-watering inputs will also help, although this may not be possible unless there is adequate properly trained labor. Improving drainage on the approaches with traditional drainage projects seems to be the most reliable strategy. Other programs that have been used with success include improving drainage and/or modifying soils through adding slit-trenches,

sand-injection aeration, and even drill-and-fill aeration. Soil conditions are highly variable from one course to another, so work with your regional USGA Green Section agronomist to develop the best plan for your facility.

Smooth surfaces are important to provide good ball roll for players to putt from the approaches onto the green. In addition to smooth surfaces, mowing height will have an impact on ball roll, as do the upright growth characteristics of the turf and its density. The mowing height needs to be sustainable based on the site, turfgrass species, and resources available. High-quality approaches often have mowing heights ranging between 0.275 and 0.450 inches. As with putting green turf, however, the lower the mowing height, the more predisposed the turf is to decline from environmental stress and disease, so agronomic adjustments to

manage the extra stress will be needed. Lightly brushing, grooming, and/or verticutting the approaches to improve upright growth characteristics of the turf and surface smoothness are often helpful.

Mowing the approaches separately from the fairways with triplex or walk-behind mowers is best. Heavy five-plex mowers can be very damaging to the turf, especially at the transition points like the collar and approach or fairway and approach interfaces. The weakest turf on many golf courses can be found at these transition points because they are so heavily trafficked from mowing equipment. For instance, two or three different pieces of mowing equipment might turn in this small area. Turning of mowers on these transition areas should be minimized to reduce mechanical stress as much as possible. A side-to-side pattern, i.e., three to six o'clock, will minimize mower turning on these areas, but extra wear and tear on the rough will need to be considered. If the mowing height is equal to the fairways, the transition point should be rotated often to minimize concentrated wear from equipment turning in the same location frequently.

CONCLUSION

Firm, smooth approaches are very important to the game of golf, given their role in players' shots to and around the putting greens. Extra labor and maintenance inputs to improve approaches may be difficult to adopt if course finances don't allow. However, because of their importance, resources should be prioritized accordingly and allocated to improve approaches before most other areas on the golf course.

LITERATURE CITED

Beard, J. B. 1982. Turf management for golf courses. First edition. Burgess Publishing Company. Minneapolis, Minn.

[ADAM MOELLER](#) is an agronomist in the Northeast Region and appreciates the value of firm, smooth approaches in the game of golf.



Brushing, grooming, and light verticutting are excellent cultural practices to improve the smoothness of turf on approaches.