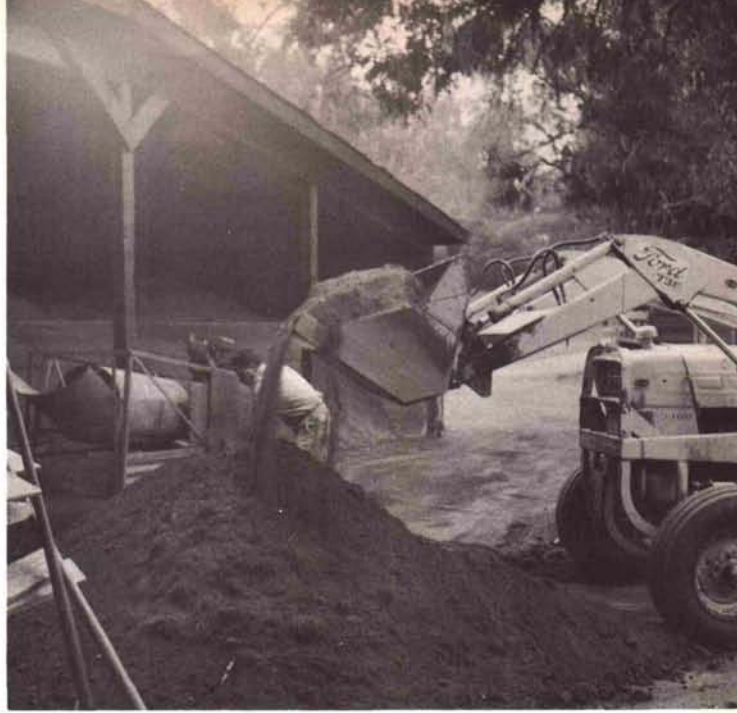


Topdressing Is Not Top Secret



by PAUL W. NEFF, Member, USGA Green Section Committee

"He had a 20-foot putt, mostly against the grain." How often have we heard such a remark on television or in the locker room?

Though I realize that grain is harder to control in some varieties of grasses than in others, one of the most neglected tools for combating it is sufficient top-dressing. Years ago many superintendents top-dressed every month of the growing season. Later it became fashionable to quit this practice because it was "too much work, too expensive and really not necessary."

In another few years there was the cry of thatch, mat, grain and too much traffic. Expensive machines were designed and used to beat the grass into submission.

Some superintendents who have managed to get some top-dressing on a few times a year did not know all the answers, but neither did they have all the problems. The bentgrass plant is put into an unnatural environment and usage on a putting green. To offset these brutalities it needs some tender loving care.

A small amount of top-dressing properly applied and dragged into the turf will cover some joints and initiate new growth. The putting surface will reach a new plateau a fraction of an inch above the old surface. Decomposition of dead matter will be hastened and the green will be more resilient and will hold more shots. The new elements in the new material seem to invigorate the grass and bring more disease resistance and less winter-kill.

I like to aerify the greens before top-dressing

because this is the nearest to cultivation that it is possible to do. Weather and play permitting, I try to top-dress in early May, late June, late August and in October. By breaking up the aerifier cores there is enough material available for a light dressing, but additional material is usually added. If the soil under the green is very dense, an application of calcined clay may help. It may be added before aerification, or during any step of the process before dragging. Flexible mats pulled behind a truckster are used for dragging.

The old-timers had one fault that should not be repeated today. Each superintendent had his own favorite soil mix. He would use it on the greens wherever he went. As superintendents changed jobs, so did the mix. By looking at a soil profile on a green, you could tell just when superintendents changed jobs. Some layers became so bad that water movement and root development were impeded. I feel you should use a mixture just like the one in the green, or mix calcine clay or sand with a similar mixture if the soil under the green needs modifying.

Top-dressing is not the hard work it used to be. We now have power shredders to condition and mix the soil; a tractor loader to feed the material into the shredder; a power spreader to apply the material to the green; and a drag mat pulled by cart power.

You will also find that the price is really not too high; members and guests will soon be telling you, "they putt the same from any direction."