

## *Irrigation Practices and the Golfer*



*A sight the golfer hates to see . . . if he's golfing.*

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In the title of this article lie two fundamental, yet entirely different philosophies. First, from the golfer's point of view, "Why is it every time I come out to play the water system is on?" The second, from the golf course superintendent, "Irrigation is one of the fundamental requirements of any plant. If we are to have good turf, we must have an effective irrigation program."

Most members want a green, uniformly well-turfed golf course without any water standing on it and certainly no irrigation interference while they are playing. Since there are but 24 hours in each day, the golf course superintendent must fit the irrigation schedule into this time frame and, when the need arises, also use the irrigation system for syringing, watering in fertilizers, etc. With a golf membership of 300 or more, someone is bound to be inconvenienced occasionally by irrigation practices.

Perhaps the problem boils down to one word: "communication." Perhaps the problem can best be described in two words: "communi-

cation and understanding." Either way, the requirements and timing of irrigation too often become an irritant between the membership and course maintenance personnel.

A not untypical irrigation story begins when the golf course superintendent decides an automatic irrigation system is needed and convinces his Green Committee Chairman, the Board of Directors and the Membership that this is the path to follow. Yes, club officials and members have been to other golf courses where automatic irrigation is in use and they are aware that it has advantages. Soon the superintendent is told, "go ahead, learn the details; let's see what it will cost." He already has the answer. "\$150,000 plus, but I know this automatic irrigation system will meet our requirements and will be flexible enough to develop a cultural program that will give us the best-conditioned golf course in town." In other words, irrigation is to be the answer and perhaps the salvation for this superintendent and his membership.

*Alert management is necessary to avoid serious damage to fairways if a leak develops.*



In a short while the first trench is dug and the installation is underway. The change from one irrigation program to another also has begun and the superintendent, his maintenance crew and the membership must now adapt to the new approach to irrigation.

Water, as we all know, is perhaps the most misunderstood phase of turf management programs. Through the years more jobs have been lost to faulty irrigation than because of any other phase of turf management. From many members' points of view, it is the superintendent who requested the "necessary evil" and he must live or die by it. The day the new irrigation system is misused by applying too little or too much water and turf is lost, the person responsible for operating the system is in trouble.

Manual irrigation systems in fairways presented a few problems. The member or caddie would occasionally turn the sprinklers off after they had been placed, and it was just a matter of time to find out which sprinkler wasn't turning and then send someone over to turn it back on, not knowing for how long that sprinkler had been inoperative. The automatic system solves this problem. But new ones develop. Now the superintendent has the responsibility to travel throughout the course and judge what areas need what amount of water. In the past the night waterman (with his talented foot) made the decision if another five minutes was needed or not.

Years ago an automatic irrigation system was installed at an eastern golf course. The superintendent had all the controllers placed in his maintenance building; from that point he could control all the valves without any hesitation or

question. I was with the superintendent one day and he said, "I want to show you all the fine innovations I have with my new automatic irrigation system," and he began flipping the switches and turning the dials and they did their thing. At least we thought they were. We were still inside the maintenance building getting ready to walk over to the fairway to watch the sprinklers in operation when suddenly one of the employees came running into the building screaming, "turn it off, turn it off!" A group of lady players had become trapped in a curtain of water. Well, from that day on, the automatic irrigation system was not a one-man show controlled by turning dials in the maintenance building and letting the system do its thing. It became a two-man show; one man in the field with 2-way communications to the main office.

On another occasion I couldn't help but notice that a particular superintendent was very upset. I asked what was wrong and he told his story.

"I just returned from the clubhouse and I almost lost my job because of an irrigation mistake. Last night there was quite a party going on around the patio, and someone had not changed the setting on the clock to have the irrigation sprinklers come on during the early morning hours, rather than the early evening hours when they normally come on to water the grounds around the clubhouse. You guessed it; the music was playing, the ladies looked glamorous in their gowns with not a hair out of place, yet when the sprinklers came on it was bedlam! It was an accident, but it was also poor management and poor communication on my part to those responsible for changing

the settings on the irrigation clocks. I knew the party was going to be held, but what I didn't know was how much would be taken out of my paycheck for dry cleaning those gowns!"

In turf management, the irrigation program is essential if adequate playing surfaces are to be developed on greens, tees and fairways. One must be very careful with the use of water; how it is applied, when it is applied and the reason why it is applied.

Let's go back to the early part of the golf season. The course has just come out of the late winter months, everyone has been cooped up and members are eager to get out and play that first round. It's most unfortunate when the first thing you must say is, "The course won't be ready for play for another week or so. The ground is too wet and we will seriously damage our greens if we put them in play now." Your decision may be a correct one, but it is not the popular one. The members do not understand the problem at hand.

As the late winter turns to spring you find that there has been a great deal of winter desiccation or damage of some type to the greens and it will take a lot of hard work and constant syringing to bring the playing surfaces back to life. And so the golfer, finally on the course, begins his season by staring at a man holding a hose or watching four or five sprin-

klers pop up around the green just as he is making his approach shot. Right here we can say the golfer has been "psyched out" with a long season ahead and water his enemy. We write about "*Poa annua*, Friend or Foe." Perhaps we should look at irrigation with the perspective of the golfer, "Water, Friend or Foe."

The winter damage to the greens has now been corrected, summer is here and another problem confronts you. The day is warm, the wind begins to blow, the course is located on a very sandy loam soil, drainage is beautiful and the major crop is *Poa annua*. You know what comes next. To hold the turf, you have to water, and you water regardless of the time of day or degree of play. Unfortunately the member, whose round has just been interrupted by water, has no idea what is going on.

A few weeks later, temperatures soar, you have just finished watering to hold the turf for another day, a dramatic thunderstorm erupts with two or three inches of unwanted water, puddles begin to show throughout the course, golf carts have been restricted and you suddenly find it is time to go out and syringe greens again as summer scald appears. As the unhappy members gaze out of the clubhouse windows and watch you water those already wet greens, they shake their heads in disbelief; "what is he

*There is a difference between syringing and flooding.*



up to now?"

On and on it goes. You try to explain. But there apparently is no satisfactory answer for the member who has planned and looked forward to playing golf on Wednesday and now finds the course closed. He has tuned out your answers. He is not interested in the reasons.

What is the answer to this problem that faces the superintendent and the member. Certainly one approach is through a well-organized turf management program in relation to water needs. For example, fertilizers are often applied on Mondays or Tuesdays. By the time the weekend comes around, the grass is growing profusely and the ragged turf is in need of supplemental water. You haven't solved anything, but you have created an irrigation need perhaps on Saturday and Sunday, the two most heavily played days of the week. With this perspective, you may say, "If I have to apply a fertilizer, why not do it on Thursday or Friday and not worry about the weekend; worry about the beginning of the following week when play is not as heavy and more water can be applied." It is best to keep all areas of the course on the reasonably firm and dry side because dry turf can be healthier, with less disease and will

withstand traffic better. Altering this one phase of the turf management program can change the attitude of your membership to a point where it will come to understand turf management practices.

Golfers simply do not like to get their feet wet. Further, more turf will be lost by applying an excessive amount of water than by not applying enough water. You can always add it, but it is a difficult commodity to remove, especially if there are drainage problems. Too often I see tees watered on Friday night that are not dry enough for Saturday or even Sunday play. These are the days when traffic is heaviest and management should be at its best. Irrigation timing must always be examined closely if you're to soothe the needs of a golfing membership. The decision rests with the superintendent. His objective must be to give the plant what it wants while giving the golfer what he wants.

Education and communication are the keys to a successful relationship between the superintendent and a golfing membership, not only in the understanding of necessary irrigation practices, but also in improved cooperation in all phases of a turf management program for a well conditioned golf course.

*A difficult approach shot.*

