



*Scalping on greens as a result of winter play.*

## *A Winter Course for Your Club*

by WILLIAM G. BUCHANAN  
Eastern Agronomist, USGA Green Section

**G**olf in recent years has become a game played by millions, which is good in many ways. It does, however, create some problems, especially in the winter when many northern courses close. With more involvement, naturally there is a tendency to want greater use of each golf facility and to keep the course open for play all winter. Significantly greater numbers want to play almost any day when the course is clear of snow, regardless of the weather. This has become a universal problem for golf course superintendents, club managers and club officials.

Sound arguments can be summoned both for and against keeping a course open in winter. Golf is always a relaxing source of recreation regardless of weather; golfers want to keep their swings grooved by playing in the winter; club dues are climbing, hence the argument for increased use of the facility. A lot of golfers want to play all year, and perhaps something

should be done to accommodate them. If the golf course is closed, they want to know why. What are the problems? Why close the course for winter?

Principally it is a case of possible damage to the turf. Without question from the agronomic point of view it would be in the best interest of everyone to keep play off the regular greens in winter. Winter play by even a few golfers can affect the quality of the course during the remainder of the year.

Perhaps if we are to have winter play, we should have a winter golf course. It could be laid out specifically for winter play, its holes interwoven among the holes on the regular course so that it avoids most of the controversial problems of playing the regular course in winter.

Take the regular greens and tees out of play completely, then design a shorter course within the framework of the regular layout. Make it

short so that it requires less time to play. Make it a course on which you can score about the same as your summer score.

How can this be done? It need not follow the regular course; it could go off in any direction bringing many new hazards into play. Begin planning in the spring. Select level, well drained areas in fairways for tees and green sites, and top-dress with sand at the rate of two cubic yards per 5,000 square feet in March, April, May, September and October and they should be acceptable for play from November through the winter. This presents all sorts of possibilities—you can tuck winter course greens behind fairway bunkers, or near other hazards to make the short course quite interesting. Winter greens need not be as large as regular greens, but they should be reasonably level and smooth enough to putt. Winter greens might be 2,000 square feet in size with a 2,000 square foot collar in order to provide a target approximately the same size involved in summer play, but one that requires less management.

If a winter course is established and is open to play regardless of weather, it takes some pressure off management. There are no decisions to make, no arguments concerning play on any given day. Come to think of it, the short course could also serve to play during adverse

weather in any season! So why just one course? Why limit so great a physical plant to just one course when the question of winter play on regular greens and tees at many clubs is so explosive?

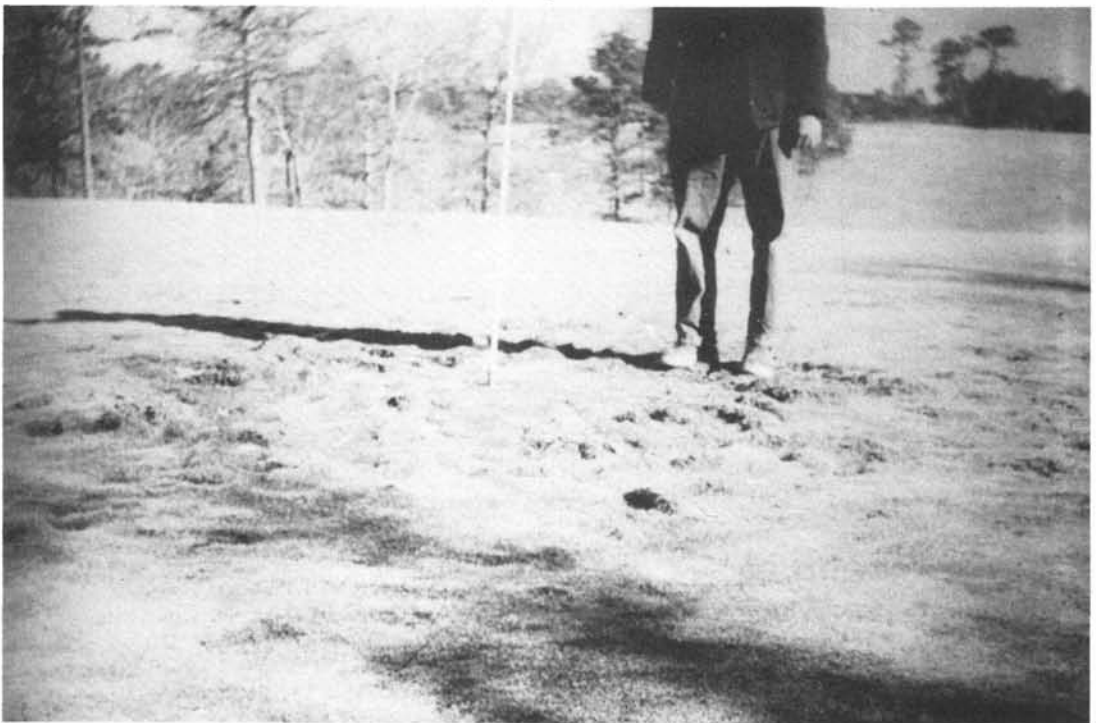
What effect does winter play have on regular greens? When are they safe to play; when are they unsafe?

Because there are so many variables, it is very difficult to precisely answer the question of "Play or no Play." The variables include the soil—its physical makeup, its physical properties and its moisture retention qualities; the grass plant—whether it is *Poa annua*, bentgrass, or a combination of the two; play—the amount and duration; and finally the weather—its extremes and fluctuations.

In the case of weather, changes occur daily or even hourly. Play at one time may cause no problems, but play even an hour or so later when conditions become unfavorable could cause serious problems to the soil and grass. The following reasons simply and basically outline the agronomics of it:

1. If the grass plant is hurt or even worn, at these times there is little or no regenerative growth to replace the injured tissue that has been insulating the plant's critical growing point or crown. The crown is

*Winter play on greens can cause considerable damage on greens when the ground is not completely frozen.*





*Golf balls make ball marks in the winter as well as in the summer.*

then much more susceptible to desiccation, diseases and direct low temperature kill.

2. In late fall or early winter when the frost first enters the ground, the grass blades become frozen and brittle. Traffic at these times will break and crack the stiff frozen blades, causing a rupture of the protoplasm in the cell. This type of injury is sometimes referred to as "winter burn."
3. Soil, the medium that determines the performance, success and failure of the

green can be severely, perhaps irreversibly harmed. Traffic on moist soil during these times of the year will result in detrimental soil compaction. As we all know, compacted soil brings on many problems.

4. Play on greens when there is standing water or slush can cause severe problems. Traffic forces this water or slush into more intimate contact with the crown of the grass plant already waterlogged. This then makes the grass plant more susceptible to ice damage and low temperature kill.



*By planning and preparing a winter course, a very acceptable putting surface can be realized and no harm will come to the summer course.*



*Car traffic will injure frozen turf.*

5. Some of the most serious types of injury occur to the grass plant and soil when the frost is just going into the ground (in the fall) and when it is just coming out of the ground (in the spring). When this is occurring, traffic on greens will tend to shear off the grass roots underfoot between the soft upper inch or two that thaws out first and the continued frozen soil further down. Besides shearing off the grass roots near the surface, soil compaction is also accelerated.
6. With any type of winter injury, there is a strong possibility that *Poa annua* will fill in the damaged areas. With more *Poa annua*, there is greater potential for summer turf problems.
7. When you have extensive winter play on greens there is usually more spring and fall maintenance work that must be performed to bring the greens up to their highest playing potential. Winter play is certainly reflected in the increased main-

tenance work involved in aeration, top-dressing, spiking and overseeding.

We realize that golf more than ever is a year-round recreational activity. When putting greens are properly constructed and maintained, and when weather conditions are right, winter play on greens can cause few problems other than a browning of the turf (winter burn). However, when conditions are not favorable, especially when the frost is just going in or just coming out of the ground, major problems occur. If play is allowed on regular greens, the days must be carefully chosen. Someone must make these day-to-day decisions with the future condition of the course in mind. It should not be kept open or closed simply because a nearby course is open or closed. Each course is an individual problem.

One way to insure against possible problems is to have and to use winter or alternate greens. These greens should be used the entire winter season or when the conditions for play on regular greens are unfavorable and injury to them could occur.