



*Fall clean up—new growth next year.*

## *Overgrooming Is Overspending*

by **PAUL VOYKIN**, Superintendent, Briarwood Country Club, Deerfield, Illinois

**D**uring the last few recession years, North American golf courses, especially some of the private clubs, have been in a serious financial situation because of skyrocketing operation costs. These operational costs, along with real estate taxes and utility costs, have increased so much that many clubs are now having difficulty keeping their heads above water. Some, as you know, have sold out to real estate developers. Others are desperately looking to fill their decreasing memberships and reluctantly lowering their application standards in order to exist. The private country club situation has not been rosy. For some clubs, the overall economic picture is gloomy and almost critical.

Directors and management are working hard to find means of surviving without drastically cutting out the gracious living syndrome familiar to country clubs. Meetings have been held throughout the country, and I am happy to state that some have been productive in finding methods of reducing operational costs. The first place they look, of course, has been where they always lose the most money—the clubhouse. I have never known a large

private club to ever come out in the black. The best club managers at most are heroes when they can maintain or reduce operational costs below those of the neighboring clubs. At very best, their goal is to break even.

Now what about the superintendent's situation? What about the golf course? Although I have always stated that a clubhouse without a golf course is nothing more than a roadside inn, with other gourmet restaurants in the area as good or better, the officials of our country clubs are also looking in our direction with a frugal eye. They are looking and saying to us: What can you as golf course superintendents do to cut down expenditures? It's your turn now.

Gentlemen, it's been our turn since I got into this profession 20 years ago. But this time the situation is obviously different and their concern is even more grave. Although we have always tried to be conservative and have held tight reins on our expenditures for many years, we too have been caught up in this inflation and have had to increase our budgets annually in order to keep up with higher wages and

accelerating maintenance costs.

Ironically, in spite of bigger and better budgets, we are being short changed by the economy. We are getting less for the club dollar in every way. Our labor staffs have been reduced. The parts for our machinery are more expensive and, sad to say, less durable. Equipment and supplies are getting costlier every year and deliveries are slow.

Another additional expense that has come upon us suddenly in some states is the new law stating that we can't burn our dead leaves and trees anymore, but we must haul them to state approved dumping areas. Meanwhile, without any letup in sight, the demand for agronomic perfection and achievement keeps hammering at us. In spite of all these drawbacks, however, I think we have succeeded with splendid results. Our golf courses are meticulously groomed and maintained. This continuing pressure on grooming and spotless maintenance of our superb golf courses, during an inflationary period has increased our budgets to alarming proportions. We are in a serious rut, and I have a startling fact to reveal. You golf course superintendents are responsible. You, whom I have admired too much and tried to emulate, have brought us to this predicament. The best among you are to blame for the situation we are in. You have set the standards too high. Let me explain quickly what I am talking about and what I think the problem is before I am shot by a friend or teacher.

The problem as I see it is overgrooming of our golf courses. We now do too much of it. The desire to improve and excel in the maintenance of our golf courses has been carried to a ridiculous and costly extreme. My contention is that if we did less grooming, the clubs could save money and at the same time have a more challenging golf course with fewer headaches.

Let me also say that I definitely do not advocate reverting to the European type of maintenance, which really is cow pasture grooming by North American standards. However, many golfers who travel overseas are crazy about them and think they have arrived at Mecca even though they do much less grooming over there. This supports my arguments. Please understand, I am not in any way talking about reducing the upkeep and management of our greens and fairways. I am talking *ONLY* about possibly reducing the cost of grooming in other areas that we so diligently maintain now. In my opinion we can let some of the areas grow a little shaggy, a little hippy so to speak, and still have a great golf course.

At Briarwood we mow our greens at a tight 3/16-inch and our wide bent collars at 1/2-inch or less. Our sloping aprons that meet the fairways in the front are cut at 3/4-inch and then we use a triplex mower to mow around the bunkers and the back mounds of the green. This is all accomplished before we even come to the rough, which is also mowed too short and too frequently. The golfers love it that way, how-

ever—especially the ladies. The fairways are mowed from 5/8- to 3/4-inch with a strip or two outside our fairways which we call intermediate rough. On a couple of holes, especially for the ladies, I mow even lower from tee to fairway because the ladies' tees on those particular holes are too far away from the "nice grass."

Next example are our tees, which, except to be level, are really not that important. They are mowed too frequently, seeded, sodded and fertilized too often. The tee banks are also mowed constantly so as not to look shabby. The precarious mowing of fairway bunkers and the laborious hand mowing around all trees on the golf course also require a lot of time and expense. At my club this never stops, and missing a day or two because of a steady rain gets me into a nervous dither. I am not going to mention other numerous areas of grooming that I do at Briarwood, but I think you get the general idea.

I am sure there are many of you here who have to contend with other time-consuming, relatively unimportant jobs, like mowing high creek banks and cultivating shrubs around tees, over edging of bunkers, pruning too high under low-branched trees, and perhaps raking bunkers that don't come into play, mulching every leaf that drops in autumn and mowing out-of-the-way areas that really don't have to be groomed at all. I learned this two years ago when I left two acres on the west side of my course un-

*Bullrushes and grass—no longer rotary-mowed.*





*"Unless other outstanding golf courses in my area followed suit, I wouldn't try less grooming without a solid agreement from my club."*

mowed all season. No one complained. In fact, no one even noticed—except the birds, rabbits, bees and butterflies. They loved the wild preservation we left untouched for them, and even a few wild flowers came up.

In the past two years, I have left six or seven more acres untouched, making it a total of approximately 10 acres of rough that we don't mow any more at Briarwood Country Club. The only way out of the long rough is with a sand wedge. Most of the wild rough is remote from the playing area and a golfer deserves a penalty if he gets into it. My Green Committee Chairman and Committee supported me all the way in my "back to nature" endeavor. Now I think the entire membership has accepted the new concept of natural prairie grass and growth as being part of golf course play. I think they rather admire Briarwood's new dimension. We are proud of our "elephant grass," as the members call it, and it's rather amusing to hear the startled remarks of guests when they first view the tall natural stands of rough.

It is becoming too expensive to maintain 160 acres like our own backyards. The machines are going constantly from morning to night.

Now, I want to correct once and for all the chronic complaint by superintendents that the membership is playing too much golf and is interfering with our work. Not so; it's the other way around: it is we who are interfering with their play. We have spoiled the golfer rotten with expensive around-the-clock grooming. Now we have the

high-cost monster looking over our shoulder with hungry fangs, and we can't afford him for a pet anymore.

Let me give you an analogy. Remember when we used to go to a barber shop to get a plain, ordinary haircut? The haircut was cheap because that's all we needed to look nice and neat. Now, it's a different story. We have a thing called hairstyling. In order to look even nicer, we have our hair rinsed with a little coloring, then razor cut, styled with a hot-air blower, set with a hair net, and finally perfumed with men's hair spray. All this is created by a hairstylist who, instead of recommending more use of a hair comb, recommends a special electric brush and hairspray. Instead of talking mostly about hockey in reply to our questions, he tells us about some men's hair shampoo and men's body deodorants, and even advises us that perhaps a moustache would look so-o-o nice. We love this attention because all of us are vain to some degree, especially as we grow older. However, all this extra grooming costs money, which is all right so long as we can afford it. Once we can't then overgrooming is over-spending. That applies to our golf courses.

Now the first important question you will ask is, how much will this save? Here's what I did. I went over my time sheet from April to October 1975 and came up with these figures.

Mowing rough at \$3.50 per hour, 700 hours = \$2,450.

Mowing with a "professional" around greens and some tees, plus the practice tee, comes to 350

hours and \$1,225.

Triplex around tees and green and fairway bunkers comes to 400 hours times \$3.50 = \$1,400.

Rotaries around trees comes to 250 hours or \$875.

Total Grooming cost is \$6,000.00.

I only chose these items because they are four maintenance items which I feel I could reduce by 50 per cent or by about \$3,000. It would still give the membership a presentable, but slightly tougher and a definitely more interesting golf course.

Some of you perhaps may not be too impressed by a meager saving of \$3,000, but, gentlemen, the point is, in a tough ball game, every run counts; besides, we can accomplish other important savings, for example, in machinery. I know I could save an impressive amount on this item of machinery over the years because instead of having my present two or more pieces of equipment for the four jobs that I mentioned—rotaries, triplex, rough, and pro—I could get along with one piece of machinery in each category because of less demand for grooming. There is \$5,000 more saved right there, not to mention saving in mechanical upkeep and gasoline.

A substantial saving also would be realized in having to use less fertilizer and pesticides, because the grass would be longer and, therefore, stronger and better able to cope with the elements with less attention. Traffic damage by carts would definitely decrease. Keep in mind please, the fact that I chose only four items that I can reduce easily by a full 50 per cent. Many other maintenance aspects can be reduced by perhaps 40 per cent, 30 per cent or 20 per cent. It all depends on how far you want to go and still have a presentable golf course.

Now the question is: why don't I do less groom-

ing? My reply is that unless other outstanding golf courses in my area agree to follow suit, I wouldn't try it without a solid agreement from my club. I would be afraid, I think, that unless I had it in black and white, I might jeopardize my job.

I am not exaggerating. The accent on quality grooming in my area is that important. I don't dare do less maintenance. The problem is also compounded by 200 or more other greenkeepers at our clubs who play other golf courses in the area and then come back and tell us what great shape the neighboring courses are in. Many unfairly always compare the golf course grooming but give no thought to or have any knowledge of local conditions, such as drainage, soil problems, water source and work force, and they also overlook other important variables such as budgets, equipment and size of golf course. My, oh my, how they forget the size of the golf course and the fact that the more acreage, the more grooming is required.

In the near future I still believe we just may have to sit down with our Chairmen and Board of Directors and show them with cost charts that grooming everything meticulously to the point of almost pricing ourselves out of the game is ridiculous. We may have to further explain that letting the grass grow a little longer and become a little more like St. Andrews will actually make the game a little more challenging and more enjoyable. The way golf should be—the way it was meant to be. Every other sport, such as hockey, baseball, football, tennis, etc. has regulations for size; the playing areas are the same for everyone, hard or easy depending upon your ability.

Golf is the only accepted game where we can make an established area easier or difficult by maintenance procedures and techniques. We have



*Not every blade of grass  
need be clipped.*

spoiled the golfer to the point where he is possessed with always having the ball in play. It started with the touring pro, and now the member is possessed also. The playing trend has swung from accuracy to an emphasis on long ball hitting and never landing in trouble. It's time we started back the other way. I believe the paramount objective of the founders and architects of this wonderful game was not this idea of present day "hairstyling" conditions and excessive grooming factors that are pricing us right out of the game. If they were here now, they would say to us, "Do less grooming—put skill back into the game."

In reading the recent results of the Chicago District Golf Association questionnaire; Item 6, Answers to Question, "Do you feel that green maintenance and capital improvements may require future limita-

tions due to financial pressure and the energy crisis?" the majority answered YES. In answer to the Question, "In what areas would you feel limitations might be first applied?," the majority from our Chicago golf courses answered, "Less golf course grooming."

To conclude, in the December issue of the *Golf Superintendent*, William H. Bengueyfield, the Editor of the USGA GREEN SECTION RECORD, wrote something that impressed me:

The word grooming is overworked today. Its meaning is muddled and in need of redefinition. A well groomed course doesn't mean that every blade of grass has to be clipped. Rather, it is a course that plays well from each tee to each green. That's the point; it plays well. The course is well groomed—for golf.

## Role of Soil Tests in Turf Management

**CHARLES G. WILSON**, Director Agronomy and Marketing  
Milwaukee Sewerage Commission

**C**ertain rules are important and should be followed if results of soil sampling, laboratory analysis and interpretation of these results are to prove meaningful to your turfgrasses.

Samples must be correctly taken. They must be representative of the turf use function as well as the soil classification. Soil samples must be taken at an exact and constant depth.

Thoughts are changing regarding the frequency of sampling for maintenance turf. Recent sampling and testing evidence points to yearly sampling of the same turf use function area. Any established golf course, regardless of the number of holes or acreage need but sample one fairway, one tee and one putting green each year to keep abreast of nutrient trends on the entire area. Sampled areas should be typically average (neither the best or the worst) and the same function area should be sampled again the following, and each subsequent year. Also, sample any area where turfgrass injury or general unthriftiness has occurred, provided the true cause of the injury, such as disease, insect damage, etc. is not already known.

New areas to be planted should be sampled separately. In this case a deep plowshare composite sample should be taken for analysis.

Maintenance samples should be taken at the same season of the year. At least two and preferably four weeks delay in sampling should follow any fertilizer application. Thus, most finished golf courses are looking at three samples yearly with possibly one or two extra some years for that new USGA specifications green, a trouble spot, or that once-in-a-decade check on the unfertilized rough. Taking

smaller numbers of samples over prior practices will save money. As to those who have never sampled, even this small amount will cost money. However, if even one worthwhile recommendation results the savings can be appreciable. As an example, under low pH or highly acidic conditions, nitrogen applications lose effectiveness. Adjusting acid soils toward the neutral point can result in a 20 per cent saving on nitrogen and make other elements more available.

Some day we hope to reach standardization of techniques among laboratories testing soils for turfgrass use. Until then it is impossible to compare one laboratory's results with another. Although much is being made in scientific circles about the merits of various extractants, cation exchange, calcium-magnesium ratios, etc., these factors pale in significance with proper sampling and proper interpretation of the results. This is because turf is a permanent and seldom harvested crop.

In the past we have said the soil test results should be interpreted by a turfgrass agronomist. Undoubtedly this was a step in the right direction as against having the tomato, corn or buckwheat scientist attempt to diagnose results for a completely unfamiliar crop. Now it is time to make further qualifications on expertise. The advisor must be aware that some turf areas are harvested continuously, whereas others never have nor ever will experience a crop removal. Further, he must understand that the ratio of N-P-K in the clippings should have absolutely no bearing on the N-P-K ratio in the fertilizer! These are strong but long overdue words.

Admittedly this will cut down appreciably on