



# The Winter Golfers Cometh

*Ice in the cup! Can golfers play today?*

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**M**OST GOLFERS in the cool temperate zone put away their clubs for the winter. Nevertheless, a few all-weather golfers are daring enough to venture onto the course into the ice, snow, wind, and frigid temperatures. They consider the weather exhilarating. The conditions offer a special challenge to be conquered. These golfers even have special equipment for their winter sport: colored low-compression golf balls, hand warmers, and electric gloves. Unfortunately, few all-weather golfers realize the damage they can cause by playing at this time of year.

Winter golf can severely injure the grasses — particularly on the putting greens. It is a form of mechanical damage, and it can delay smooth, true putting surfaces until well into the regular playing season. Not surprisingly, most golfers want smooth putting greens from the early spring through the fall. Winter play can, and frequently does, destroy efforts by the golf superintendent to create such conditions. My goal and

that of most superintendents has always been to have the best putting greens possible during the regular golfing season.

Several problems are caused by winter play on the putting greens. If the greens are frozen and begin to thaw during the day, the putting surface will become too soft and wet to withstand very much traffic. Walking on the green causes footprinting and rutting that disrupts the trueness. The rutting will often refreeze and cause bumpy greens in the spring. This can only be corrected by topdressings to smooth the surface. While our topdressing program calls for light, frequent applications, we must use more material per application to alleviate the untrue putting surfaces. The extra topdressing adds to maintenance costs. It is an important part of the program, however, if we are to provide ideal playing conditions at the very beginning of the golfing season.

Winter play can also damage the root systems of the grasses. During the winter, roots are usually present in the

upper several inches of a putting green soil. If a surface thaw should occur, foot traffic can sever roots at the frost line. The greens will then require extra care next summer if the root systems do not recover. Another form of hidden, unseen damage can also occur. When soils are thawed, wet or saturated, and subjected to constant traffic, they rapidly lose their texture, their ability to remain friable, and they easily become tight and compacted. This too restricts root systems and growth next summer.

Since they are dormant, grasses are unable to recover from any type of damage caused by the winter golfer. *Poa annua* usually enters these areas in early spring. Any increase in *Poa annua* is most damaging to the quality of a green. The permanent grass population of the green is reduced and maintenance headaches increase. This damage may be seen for many years and is a reminder of the effects of winter play.

After I stated my arguments against winter play on our regular greens, the Board of Directors at my club asked

for alternatives. The first consideration was alternate greens. These "greens" would be an area in the approaches to our regular greens cut at fairway height with an oversized hole. The Golf Committee, however, felt such "greens" were unacceptable for the members to enjoy.

**T**HE MEMBERS stated their opinions about using the regular greens. Some golfers wanted to play the regular greens only when they became frozen. The problem with this approach is determining if the soil is frozen enough to make it through the day. It is not unusual in the cool temperate zone for the putting greens to be frozen in the morning, only to have temperatures in midday rise to permit a surface thaw. All of a sudden, those frozen greens become pot-marked with foot traffic by the end of the day.

Another theory was to play the putting greens when they became frozen, but have the flexibility to switch to alternate greens when thawing occurred. Again, this proved unacceptable because of circumstances requiring golfers to begin their rounds on the regular greens and then switch to alternate greens halfway through a stipulated round.

A fourth consideration came from an article by the USGA Green Section. The idea was to create a shorter course within the framework of the existing layout. The article covered many points that seemed workable in our situation. The main concern, again, was the quality of the putting greens within this design.

While a shorter golf course was being considered, I discussed our winter play situation with several superintendents in my area and with the USGA Green Section representative. Through these discussions came the idea to use our bentgrass tees as winter greens! Play could be initiated from rough areas in front of the regular greens and routed down the fairways to the tees. This would achieve the shorter winter course design and eliminate the construction of 18 winter greens. The preparation of tees could follow the regular maintenance schedule, thus keeping our monetary commitment within budget.

**T**HE MAINTENANCE program for the teeing ground in the fall remained consistent with previous years. The tees are vertically mowed and aerified. These operations are followed with a heavy topdressing of three to four cubic yards per 5,000 square feet. This does an

excellent job of leveling the surfaces on all the par-4 and par-5 holes. The par-3 tees, however, were still deeply scarred by divot marks making them unsuitable for putting. Our concern over the par-3 tees necessitated hand topdressing. Play should be limited on these tees in the late fall to minimize scarring. Several light topdressings in the fall further helped to keep the teeing grounds firm and smooth. Our regular mowing height of one-quarter inch was consistent through the regular season and the tees were ready for the change to "winter greens."

The switch to the winter course was made in early January and continued through mid-March. Two hole locations were placed in each tee. Each group would change the flagstick to the other hole to minimize wear. The winter players were able to enjoy the golf course and we were able to provide them with a reasonable putting green.

Our winter course was moderately successful in its first year of play. We hope to improve the winter design and the conditions of the winter greens each year, so our membership, at least those hardy few, can enjoy their golf course year-round.

*Foot traffic — foot damage.*



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