



# Quality Playing Conditions for The Public Golfer

*The clubhouse at Hominy Hill, site of the 1983 U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship.*

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PUBLIC GOLF COURSES have always been considered to have lower turfgrass standards and poorer playing conditions than private clubs. Having visited, played, and worked on many private and public golf courses, it is interesting to note that a public course can provide both excellent playing conditions and beautiful aesthetic qualities. With adequate budgets and additional maintenance practices necessary for quality turf, the public golfer can and should enjoy playing conditions equal to his counterpart at the private level.

The Monmouth County Park System, in Monmouth County, New Jersey, owns and operates four golf courses open to the public. Two of the courses, Hominy Hill and Howell Park, are 18-hole championship layouts. Hominy Hill, selected in a magazine article as one of America's 50 Greatest Public Courses, will be the site of the 1983 U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship. It receives 45,000 rounds of golf per year. Howell Park receives 42,000 rounds per year. Both courses have unusual characteristics and provide golfers with conditions they can appreciate.

Greens at both courses average 7,000 square feet and tees between 4,000 and

5,000 square feet. Fairway turf has been reduced in past years through contour mowing efforts, and now averages approximately 23 acres for each course.

Maintenance practices are geared toward the heavy play that averages 230 golfers per day in June, July, and August, and 170 per day during April, May, September, October, and November. Before getting into any detail about our maintenance practices, it is worth mentioning the policies that have been approved by the Park System and have given us the opportunity to provide quality playing conditions. These policies have kept the courses from being run into the ground.

These policies include:

1. All play must begin on the first hole. With play beginning at 7:00 a.m. during the week and 6:00 a.m. on weekends, it would be impossible for us to provide quality work without this rule.

2. Golf cart traffic is limited to 50 carts per day, and carts are not allowed at all one day per week. This has been helpful in minimizing traffic and providing fairways that do not require improved lies for a good part of the season. No carts are allowed after 3:00 p.m., and carts are prohibited by the

superintendent when conditions are unfavorable.

3. Courses are closed from December 15 through March 15 to avoid damage from play on dormant turf.

4. Green fees are set to reflect the type of budget needed to provide high-quality playing conditions.

In addition to these policies, mention should be made of the economics of the operation. The golf courses are financed through county taxes, but revenues exceed operating and capital expenditures. The operating budget for the maintenance of Hominy Hill in 1982 was about \$230,000, which is comparable to many private clubs in the area. The crew averages four full-time employees in the winter and 10 during the summer.

Green fees at the four courses vary and are based on the respective maintenance budgets. At Hominy Hill, green fees in 1981 were \$6.50 for county residents and \$13. for non-residents. Golf carts are available for \$13. Senior citizens pay \$3.75 weekdays but must pay the regular fee on weekends. Revenue in 1981 for Hominy Hill from green and cart fees, concession and golf shop (both operated by the county) was \$580,000, an average of \$13. per round of golf.

As mentioned before, maintenance practices on greens, tees, fairways, and roughs are based for the most part on numbers of rounds played. To reduce compaction problems resulting from heavy play, it is important, I feel, that a cushion of thatch be provided on the playing areas. One-quarter inch is desired.

**T**HE GREENS at Hominy Hill and Howell Park are about 95 percent Penncross creeping bentgrass. Four and one-half pounds of nitrogen are provided per year through a 22-0-16 fertilizer applied at .3 to .5 pounds nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every three weeks. During the summer, fertilizers are applied in early evening to discourage burn around cups from the 230 golfers we expect daily. Greens are mowed at 3/16 inch five times per week (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, Sunday). Greens are lightly topdressed monthly, aerated in June and September, and several problem greens are aerated an additional time in April. Straight sand or high-sand materials are used for topdressing to minimize compaction problems.

Verticutting lightly, to ensure a true putting surface, is practiced about two to three times per month. Verticutting to remove thatch is necessary on only certain areas of the greens. Though cups are changed daily and most of the green is utilized for pin placement, thatch buildup can be a problem around perimeters of greens and on collars.

Pests in our area include pythium, dollar spot, brown patch, leaf spot, cutworms, and grubs. A preventive disease control program is followed, and insecticides and herbicides are applied as needed. Wetting agents have been used for a number of years. They are applied as a granular or liquid monthly.

Collars are treated like greens, except they are cut at 3/8 inch three times a week.

The majority of the turf on tees is mixed bentgrass varieties. A few tees at Howell Park are bluegrass and a few at Hominy are ryegrass. The ryegrass has been used on two tees that suffer from a considerable amount of shade and do not hold up well with bentgrass. The condition of these tees has improved and overseeding with ryegrass will continue. Tees are mowed three times a week with a Greensmaster set at one-half inch and receive between 4 1/2 and 5 1/2 pounds nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year. They are aerated in June and

October, and several tees receive an additional aeration in April. A pre-emergence herbicide is applied in April and on certain tees in June after aerating.

Tee markers are changed daily and all the teeing area is used. Regular (white) markers may be located near blues (championship) or reds (ladies) on a given day, but the number of markers near reds will equal those near the blue to equalize the yardage of the golf course. The most important maintenance practice used on tees is the filling of divots with topdressing soil and seed twice weekly. From the time we open in March until Thanksgiving we rarely miss a week. This practice takes between two and four man-hours per 18 holes, depending on the number of divots. Verticutting to remove thatch is practiced on ladies' and championship teeing areas, which receive less play. Because of this, less fertilizer is also applied to these areas. Insecticide, fungicides, and wetting agents are used on a regular basis.

**T**URF ON FAIRWAYS at Hominy Hill is 70 percent bluegrass, with the remaining 30 percent a mixture of ryegrass, bentgrass, and *Poa annua*. Fairways receive 2 1/2 pounds nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year, are aerated once or twice per year (June and/or October), and are mowed at 7/8 inch four times per week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday). Ends of fairways (toward tees) are aerated at least twice a year and are occasionally mowed with a triplex mower to compensate for damage from turning large mowing units in these areas. Approaches are mowed with triplex units only. Insecticides, fungicides, and wetting agents are used on fairways to keep turf healthy and pest free. Pre-emergent herbicides are applied in April for control of crabgrass.

Howell's fairways are predominantly bentgrass and are mowed at 5/8 inch three times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday). Fairways are verticut in April to remove excess thatch and are aerated in October. Two and one-half pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet are applied per year, and insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, and wetting agents are used to ensure quality playing conditions. Approaches are mowed at one-half inch with a Greensmaster, and all approaches and fairways have been contoured to provide optimal playing and aesthetic conditions.

Wear areas around greens, tees, and between bunkers and greens present an added challenge to quality playing

conditions. Because of traffic concentration, sides of tees are aerated three to four times a year with a fairway aerator. Fertilizer is applied at one-half pound nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per application from three to four times per year to these areas. Ballwashers, baskets, benches, and water coolers are moved each day with tee markers to keep areas alongside tees from wearing excessively. A Greensaire is used to aerate between sand bunkers and collars so that quality turf can be maintained. Pull carts, used by the majority of golfers, can cause stress on these turf areas. Wetting agents and fertilizers are also applied. Ropes, signs, and cart paths, all necessary evils, help us control wear around greens and tees. Ropes and signs are moved periodically so that wear is not restricted to one location. At the end of each year, the areas that do not recover from traffic, especially around the first tee and between bunkers and collars, are resodded.

Low cut rough or no rough at all, practiced on many public courses to speed play, can only hurt the image of a public golf course. The practice does not define the playing area and allows the ball to roll farther into trouble and away from greens and fairways.

I would like to touch briefly on another problem of concern to many of us in public golf. Public course players do not have the pride that private club members often have toward the golf course. Few days go by without seeing a golf cart going across a tee or riding inches from a green. Public golfers feel less responsible when it comes to repairing ball marks, replacing divots, and raking sand bunkers. Our biggest vandalism problem has been the golfer himself. Divots out of greens, clubs thrown through litter baskets and golf carts, golf carts running into irrigation control boxes and through sand bunkers; these are but a few of the situations we must deal with constantly.

**E**VEN WITH the large number of poor-quality golfers working against the public courses, I feel that with a reasonable budget, high standards, and a crew and staff who take a lot of pride in what they produce, quality playing conditions can be attained on public golf courses. Maybe someday the public golf course superintendent will not have to live with the words, "It's in nice condition — for a public course." Maybe someday, just maybe, he will hear, "This is a fine golf course and you have it in fine condition!" We hope so.