

# Is Today's Golf Course Management Too Fine?

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**T**HE MAINTENANCE level of North American golf courses is usually directly proportional to the size of the budget, but it does not necessarily equate to the best maintained or playable facility. Knowledge, experience, and dedication of the superintendent and his crew can make a big difference in cost-per-hole maintenance. Likewise, climate, topography, soil factors, and intensity of use can also influence maintenance budgets. Mega-bucks Golf and Country Club may spend over \$20,000 per hole for maintenance while Mini-bucks Golf Club may spend half that and still have an enjoyable test of golf. The difference is usually the fineness of management required to meet the expectations of the clientele, who may or may not be willing to pay for the fine tuning but still expect perfection.

Without a doubt, golf course management is too fine today from a number of viewpoints. National television coverage of major tournaments showing immaculate grooming, over-exuberance of committees and superintendents who want their putting greens to be the fastest in the country, and very low handicap golfers are just a few of the reasons for overkill in fine management. Grasses are chlorophyll-dependent living plants. They have use and management limitations that the professional golf course superintendent already knows about but may not be able to control because of demands by the players.

**V**OLUMES HAVE been written over the years. Some excellent articles concerning the evils of excessively close mowing were published in the November-December 1984 issue of the USGA GREEN SECTION RECORD; they should be read by committees and golf course superintendents alike. We are definitely going in the wrong direction with continuous mowing heights shorter than 3/16 inch. When greens are mowed at 1/8 inch or less, only a little leaf tissue remains for the active photosynthesis the plant needs to maintain proper color, density, rooting characteristics, resistance to diseases, and recuperative potential. Besides, close

cutting is only one of the factors that affect putting green speed. Moderate use of nitrogen, light frequent topdressing, brushing, verticutting, and carefully controlled irrigation can increase green speed significantly.

The starved, fast syndrome has produced some strange, previously uncommon symptoms, including moss, lichens, algae, and thin turf. A whole complex of symptoms caused by mildly pathogenic organisms have become more visible under extreme stress. Instead of returning to sound management practices, we simply intensify our fungicide programs and increase management cost — sometimes without success. Problems caused by anthracnose and certain unidentified basidiomycetes have increased over the last decade and can be correlated with overfine management.

Putting greens mowed at 3/16 inch will meet most speed requirements with applications of two to three cubic feet per 1,000 square feet of good quality sand applied every two to three weeks. Over-irrigated putting greens with high percentages of organic matter and fine-textured soils will not putt as fast as firm, dry sand surfaces. To compensate for wet, soft surfaces, we lower the mowers to increase speed. Yes, this is managing too fine, or simply not good

judgment. It is understood, of course, that we maintain balances of other nutritional and management practices, but these are a few of the most significant.

The demand for closer lies on fairways has resulted in decreased mowing heights to the point where, in certain areas of the country, Kentucky bluegrass has virtually been eliminated on many golf courses. These fairways have become dominated by annual bluegrass (*Poa annua*). Occasionally we have survived this botanical shift in some northern cool-season regions by changing to bentgrass management on these fairways, or by increased fungicidal programs to protect the annual bluegrass.

**T**HE USE OF putting green aerifiers and small lightweight triplex mowers may be considered by some to be too fine management. In my view, this is one of the best things that has happened to golf course fairways for those who can afford the expense. The small aerifiers do a better job of coring, while triplex mowers induce less compaction, produce more uniform mowing patterns, and, in some cases, significantly improve the quality of the fairway grasses. For the low-budget golf course, this is too fine management; for the clubs that can afford it, these may become standard practices.

The removal of grass clippings from fairways can be classed as managing too fine. The removal of grass clippings is labor-intensive, even though the aesthetics seem to make it worthwhile. Nutrient loss from clipping removal can also significantly increase fertilization costs.

**F**AIRWAY TOPDRESSING with sand or soil is one of the better means of controlling thatch, but is very expensive and can only be instituted by golf courses that can afford it. The playability of fairways with heavy-textured slow-draining soils could be significantly improved with sand topdressing, and in some cases this would be economically feasible.

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Some golf courses suffer from the lush, soft syndrome because club policy dictates wall-to-wall green. Because of variations in soil texture and depth and topography, it is virtually impossible to maintain uniform water distribution and infiltration rates throughout the golf course. Invariably, steep terrain will have water-stressed areas or burnout during the summer. Although increasing the use of wetting agents and more intensive aerification may help the effectiveness of applied water, it nonetheless increases costs of management and is not always effective. We are managing too fine when we try to keep every inch of the golf course green at all times. The usual result is excessively wet low-lying areas at the expense of keeping a few isolated areas green all the time. Automatic irrigation with sophisticated controls will partially correct this type of problem, but in most cases, not entirely.

Green committees and playing members should be extremely cautious in making decisions that are counter-productive to the best management of their grasses and soils. Before implementing hard-core management decisions, a green committee should carefully discuss the situation with the golf course superintendent, and if the committee is still not satisfied, it may refer the question to competent consulting agronomists.

**M**ANY MORE AREAS of golf course management can be labeled as too fine. It is the responsibility of each professional golf superintendent to communicate effectively with his committees to prevent the kind of mistakes that seem to be arising more frequently. A golf club hires a qualified superintendent because he is the most knowledgeable person for managing the golf turf. So why is his advice so frequently overruled? Many years ago Bobby Jones stated, "The first purpose of any golf course should be to give pleasure, and that to the greatest number of players — because it will offer problems a person may attempt according to his ability. It will never become hopeless for the duffer nor fail to concern and interest the expert."

As long as we are doing the best management job possible with the budgets we can afford, what's wrong with the rule of playing the course as you find it and the ball as it lies? In this age of high technology and scientific advancements, let us not lose sight of common-sense management.



*(Above) Putting Green aerifiers on fairways. Great if you can afford it!*

*(Opposite page, right) Over management results in Poa annua greens. Desiccation losses can be disastrous.*

*(Opposite page, far right) Close mowing and starvation can destroy putting greens.*

