

IT'S A MATTER OF OPINION

It's certainly safe to say that opinion varies widely on many subjects having to do with turfgrass science and golf course management. Following are three speakers' opinions on three controversial topics. See if what they say doesn't make you stop and think!

What They Don't Teach in Turf Schools

by **JAMES A. JOHNS**

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WHEN I LOOK BACK and see what was being done on golf courses as recently as 10 years ago, and compare it to what is being accomplished now, I get a good look at how much the turf business has really changed. If I would have said to another superintendent at that time that I was going to establish a program of mowing my fairways with a triplex greensmower and collect the clippings, he would have said I had been out in the sun too long. Today, though, mowing fairways with lightweight mowers and collecting the clippings has become standard on many golf courses.

Jim Latham, the USGA's regional agronomist in our area, came to Northmoor Country Club for our annual visit last September. During his tour he noticed that two of my greens showed strange color patterns, and he asked me what had happened. I told him that during the week before his visit I had my turf placement student come back in the evening to fertilize the greens. We regularly fertilize in the evening so we don't bother the golfers, and it also allows me to water in the fertilizer in conjunction with my evening water cycle.

As it turned out, the student had misconnected the electrical wires on the spreader, causing the spreader fan to rotate backwards. The fertilizer was spread unevenly, causing a light and dark green striped pattern to show up a few days later.

Let me explain that this was not the turf student's first experience fertilizing greens for me; he had fertilized three times previously. I had explained that afternoon that he must take time to connect the electric spreader to the back of the vehicle that would be used to apply the fertilizer, making sure that everything was ready to go for that



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evening. He had been shown in previous training operations that the spreader should be tried on the parking lot each time to ensure that it was functioning properly before he began on the greens and tees. Most importantly, I had explained to him that an ounce of prevention is far better than the pound of grief you get when the job is done poorly.

As we all know, everyone notices mistakes made on the golf course, and it is the superintendent, not the turf student, who will be held responsible. If the damage is great enough, it could cost him his job.

Don't misunderstand and think that I'm saying that all the problems on the golf course are caused by turf students, because that is not the case at all. The young turfgrass students I have worked with have been very good and willing workers. The young man learned a lot from his experience, and it is not one he

will soon forget. As it turned out, no great damage was done, just a little color variation on the two greens, and a very worried young man.

The problem I have found with turf placement students is that while they may have a great educational background after completing school, which is very, very important, they lack the important hands-on experience that is so necessary to be successful in this business. I believe colleges and universities should offer more hands-on work at local golf courses to allow the turfgrass students more of the necessary practical experience before they are graduated. It should not be the job of the golf course superintendent to provide all of the practical training.

I have also found that some of the students coming out of the turfgrass schools believe working on a golf course for a couple of summers while they complete school will prepare them to be an assistant for a year or two, and then move right up to the head superintendent job at some big-paying club.

Landing a good job just does not happen that way at all. Nor should it happen that way. It takes a lot of time, dedication and hard work on the golf course, gaining experience in every type of job from raking bunkers to setting up greens and tees for daily use, to the management of the work crew. Managing a crew of workers today takes a lot of time, personal understanding, and maturity. It is probably the most important job of the golf course superintendent. The young turf student can learn from school, but managing people comes instead from practical experience.

Somehow, colleges and universities have to find a way to balance a good technical education with good field experience.