



Providing a better root zone for the bentgrass or bermudagrass putting surface is one of the most popular reasons for greens renovation. Blue Heron Hills Country Club, Macedon, New York.

# Avoiding the Hazards of Golf Course Renovation

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**W**EBSTER defines *renovation* as “. . . a restoration to an earlier condition or to impart new vigor to; to revive.” In many ways, this definition can be related to golf courses. Putting surfaces are revived by replacing the root-zone mix and planting improved bentgrass varieties. Bunkers are restored when faces are rolled down and fresh new sand replaces old contaminated materials. In parts of the Midwest, uniformity is brought to green surrounds by stripping the mixes of blue-

grass, *Poa annua*, bentgrass, and even bermudagrass, and then resodding to an improved bluegrass blend.

Anyone who ever attempted to sell such a renovation project to a green committee or membership is well aware of the positive implications of the project. Improved bentgrass varieties, better drainage, level tees, consistent surrounds, new sand in the bunkers, etc., are all benefits one can expect from renovation. Any of these issues can lead to better playing conditions for your golfers.

This should lead to fewer worries, happier times, and more job security for the superintendent . . . right?

Unfortunately, no . . . at least not immediately. In fact, one can probably plan on the hard work and long hours involved with renovation paying off for the next superintendent at the course. I believe more superintendents have lost their jobs (and sometimes their families) in the midst of, or soon after, a renovation project than for almost any other reason.



## High Expectations

Why is this unfortunate occurrence becoming more commonplace at courses throughout the country? Perhaps because the positive aspects of a project are promoted too aggressively while ignoring, or in some cases even concealing, the negative aspects. Expectations become very high during the project and then become deflated for any one of several reasons. Projects not being completed on time, new sand in the bunkers being temporarily unplayable, or, perhaps most common, “the new greens just aren’t as good as the old ones were” can all contribute to unfulfilled expectations.

Members or players need to be reminded that renovation on a golf course is much different from renovating a 1955 Thunderbird. When restoration is completed on the car, it is at its absolute best. In time, dirt, scratches, dings, and dents begin to detract from its appearance. A renovated golf course reverses this timeline; it must heal from the process and mature over time.

In other words, one might better relate the renovation of the golf course to plastic surgery. There will be scars from the reno-

vation that take time to heal. Roads used for trucks hauling sand and gravel to the site will be extremely compacted and need repeated aerification over several years before they are back to normal. New root-zones must mature before providing a stable growing environment for the recently planted bentgrasses. Fresh sand in bunkers may be fluffy for six to 12 months or longer before it stabilizes and “fried egg lies” are eliminated. Irrigation trenches will settle and will need supplemental backfilling. Mother Nature will not be rushed in spite of the best efforts of the superintendent and his staff, or pressure from the golfers. To help ensure the success of the project, the knowledgeable superintendent needs to not only communicate the benefits that will be realized from the project, but the hazards and risks as well. Let’s take a closer look at two of the most common areas of the course targeted for renovation.

## Greens

Renovation of greens is sweeping the country. Memberships and superintendents are making the decision to improve both



drainage and putting quality by replacing old rootzone mixes and planting new bentgrass or bermudagrass varieties. When the old rootzones are removed and a new mixture of laboratory-approved sand and organic matter is added, drainage improves dramatically. But as the water quickly drains through the new rootzone, so do the nutrients. The new mix is normally very sterile and has little nutrient content or nutrient-holding capacity. In many cases, it will take the mix at least a year, or sometimes two, before it matures. It's imperative that the golfers understand that until then they can expect wide swings in appearance and putting quality.

Another common scenario is starting the project too late and then seeding or planting the greens after the ideal time. Missing this "planting window" is just like gambling. Occasionally, the weather will stay warm, the greens grow in well, and those in charge will feel like they hit the jackpot. However, when playing Mother Nature's casino, one must

remember that the odds are in her favor, and an early, cold fall and winter may leave your greens' surfaces completely bankrupt of grass.

When considering greens renovation, determine the ideal window for planting and growth of the new grass. For example, when planting bentgrass in the Midwest, mid-August to mid-September would be considered the optimum time for seeding. Therefore, construction should begin 60 to 90 days prior (depending on the scope of the project) to the seeding dates. This means losing a summer's worth of golf and revenue, and many players and managers will balk at that possibility. However, late planting dates can spell disaster for the project and the superintendent.

Generally, late planting means more downtime and expense to the club. To extend the growing season as long as possible when bentgrass is planted late, covers are often purchased to retain heat and minimize erosion. They also add about \$10,000 to the cost of the project. Is your course willing to spend these extra dollars for covers that may never be needed? If the renovation work is started after Labor Day, more delays from inclement weather can be expected. Cooler temperatures mean slower germination and growth. Remember that the water from a heavy rain will dry out or evaporate much more quickly in late summer's hot temperatures than in the cooler ones of late fall. The important planting windows cannot be overemphasized and should be strongly stressed to the membership. Finally, late planting usually means late opening and upset memberships. Avoid these headaches and heartbreaks . . . plant on time!

### **Bunkers**

Bunker restoration projects can range from replacing the old sand, rechanneling drainage elsewhere,

reworking internal drainage to refacing the bunker. However, from the members' standpoint, the most important characteristic was not mentioned. In their minds, how the new bunker sand ultimately plays is their foremost thought.

The new sand will likely be loose in nature and produce *fried egg lies* for months after the bunkers have been renovated. Most sands firm up within six months to a year after renovation. If proper testing has not been conducted, the sand could stay soft for an indefinite amount of time. It is critical to educate the members on these points. Include enough money to test the new sand on several occasions, and make your membership aware that the sand has to weather or season for several months before good playability is returned.

### **The Need for a Strong Finish**

So often the bulk of the construction project is performed in good order, but the "finishing off" phase is poor. Therefore, the overall perception of the project becomes tainted. Almost every contractor can get 80% of the job completed; however, it is the exceptional companies that finish the last 20%. In many cases, the contractor is anxious to get to the next job and simply does not have the staying power to finish the job properly. This really separates the top-notch building contractors from the rest of the pack. Be sure to state clearly in the contract exactly how all facets of the golf course renovation work are to be completed. Once an agreement has been reached, the superintendent or club liaison needs to make the contractor finish the job in a timely and professional manner. Remember, any work the contractor fails to finish properly will have to be completed by the existing maintenance staff. These added tasks take unnecessary time and money out of the budget.

### **Conclusion**

There is an old saying in the real estate business that the three keys to successful business ventures are location, location, and location. Successful renovation projects may hinge on communication, communication, and communication. Those desiring renovation will most assuredly expound on the positive aspects of the project. However, the potential downside or negative aspects must also be explained even if it risks the approval of the renovation. There is nothing more taxing (mentally or physically) for a superintendent or membership than renovating their golf course. By playing the devil's advocate and making sure every aspect of the project is well understood, the likelihood of a potentially disappointing experience will be significantly decreased.

*Improving drainage is just one of many reasons why bunker renovation is popular. It's important to be sure the membership understands that the new sand may be "soft" for several months.*

