

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

First greens and now fairways. It's time for a call to reason.

by ROBERT VAVREK, JR.

SUPERINTENDENTS are mowing fairways shorter than ever, perhaps in response to pressure from the minority of low-handicap golfers at a particular course who prefer an extremely tight lie. As recently as five years ago, the average height of cut on bentgrass or bentgrass/*Poa annua* fairways in the North Central Region was between $\frac{1}{2}$ " and $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Today the average height of cut is slightly under $\frac{1}{2}$ " and a small, but increasing, number of courses are mowing at a tight $\frac{3}{8}$ ".

Older courses that once maintained Kentucky bluegrass fairways at 1" or higher are now mowing at about $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Referring to these playing surfaces as Kentucky bluegrass is wishful thinking because *Poa annua* dominates the stand of turf within a year or so, after the older varieties of bluegrass thin out.

An argument could be made that there is no harm in mowing the bentgrass and *Poa* below $\frac{1}{2}$ " since it performs quite well on tees and collars at even shorter heights of cut. Similarly, new Kentucky bluegrass varieties are available that are well adapted to a $\frac{3}{4}$ " cut. But before you decide to lower the height of cut, consider the following indirect effects of your action.

Most beginners and high-handicap golfers prefer to sweep the ball from a relatively high lie in the fairway. An increasing number of complaints are being heard at Turf Advisory Service visits regarding extremely tight fairway lies. The silent majority of golfers, who probably fear ridicule at voicing a complaint about the greens being too fast, are not having any problem making themselves heard when it comes to $\frac{3}{8}$ " fairways.

Lower the height of cut a notch and the various problems associated with earthworm castings and ant mounds will increase. Earthworm casts and ant mounds are more likely to become mashed down by mowers and affect

the quality of turf when the fairways are cut shorter. This can be a significant problem on perennial ryegrass or *Poa annua* fairways because turf species that have an upright growth habit also have a limited ability to grow laterally into the bare areas. Superintendents and golfers often wonder why the worms and ants were never a serious problem in the past. One explanation is that the fairways were never cut so low in the past. Keep in mind that there are no pesticides labeled for earthworm control in the United States and that the typical treatments for ant control, at best, reduce populations for only a few weeks.

Root growth is directly related to the height of cut, so higher-cut fairway turf generally has a deeper, healthier root system compared to shorter-cut turf. Shade from all the "committee trees" that have been located too close to fairways is also a problem on many older courses. Shade limits photosynthesis, so every bit of leaf tissue is critical to intercept what little light is available under trees. Shaded, poorly rooted turf has a reduced ability to recover from divots, cart traffic, disease activity, scalping, and other stress. Furthermore, more careful irrigation management and more weed control will probably be needed on short-cut fairways, again due to poor turf density and a weaker root system.

Most superintendents are familiar with the term *triplex ring* — the wear pattern caused by riding mowers along the inside perimeter of greens. We now see *five-plex ring* along the inside perimeter of fairways where lightweight mowers are causing a similar pattern of injury. Shade, poor drainage, overwatering, and golf cart traffic definitely contribute to the turf injury, but the mower injury tends to be worse at courses mowing bentgrass fairways well under $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

These concerns are only magnified when old Kentucky bluegrass fairways are scalped down to emulate bentgrass fairway playing conditions. The percentage of *Poa annua* skyrockets and weed encroachment becomes a greater concern each season. Then the susceptibility of the turf to winterkill increases because of the high percentage of *Poa annua*. Eventually, some scattered colonies of bentgrasses are seen, which excites the golfers because they believe they have discovered the inexpensive route to bentgrass conversion. The excitement turns sour when they discover that most of the bentgrass colonies are extremely grainy and coarse textured. Fairways that once provided consistent playing conditions at a higher height of cut are now characterized by clumpy ryegrass, scraggly bentgrass, and *Poa annua* that may or may not survive the winter or summer.

There are undoubtedly some courses where a $\frac{3}{8}$ " fairway is an acceptable and perhaps a desirable playing surface for many of the golfers. On the other hand, tighter is not necessarily better for the majority of golfers who do not have single-digit handicaps. In my opinion, fairway heights of cut are getting out of hand. It's not quite as bad as the mowing heights on greens, but it's close.

Ode to Tight Lies

*There once was a course in St. Pete
Where most duffers found the (high-cut) fairways a treat.*

The Club Champ, they say,

Hit a flyer one day,

So the fairways now stimp seven feet!

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