

MAXIMIZING AVAILABLE FOOTAGE

By midsummer, does your practice range tee look like a battlefield?

by BOB BRAME

THERE IS A direct relationship between available tee footage, play volume, and turf quality. Nowhere is this more evident than on a practice range tee. While there is a formula* to correlate size, traffic, and turf quality on a regular tee, it does not apply to a practice tee. There simply is no way to correlate an individual's practice with holes played. However, it is safe to say that most practice range tees are heavily played. Equally, most courses have no option for enlarging usable practice tee footage. This turf tip deals with a few simple ideas to maximize available practice tee footage.

Tom Zimmerman, superintendent and general manager at Elcona Country Club in northern Indiana, has combined three strategies to maintain a high-quality practice tee surface for his membership. These components include: (1) A full-time attendant throughout the summer; (2) a divot filling mix of sand (60%), soil (20%), and peat moss (20%), with perennial ryegrass; and (3) a spool-mount hose coil.

Through a rotation of two employees, an attendant is present from 6:00 A.M. until dark between Memorial Day and Labor Day at the Elcona Country Club practice facility. These employees are part of the pro shop staff, yet their responsibilities involve everything from A to Z, with the exception of mowing and applying pesticides. The prompt filling of tee divot damage and nursing the young plants to maturation are key attendant responsibilities and paramount to the maintenance of a quality practice tee surface. Directly aware of wear patterns and plant maturation, the attendants carefully manage the hitting line with the placement of club racks and ball baskets.

**You need 100 square feet of usable tee footage for every 1,000 rounds of golf played each year. On par 3s, the first and tenth tee, or any tees where irons are normally used, you need 200 square feet of usable tee footage for every 1,000 rounds of golf played each year.*



The hose coil mounted at the back of the practice tee makes it easy for attendants to water seeds and plants as needed, without interrupting practice. When watering is complete, the hose can be quickly re-coiled out of the way.

Although Tom is now the general manager, the joint efforts of the pro shop and maintenance staffs to produce the best possible practice facility have been in place for several years. Courses that view the upkeep of the practice range tee as only the maintenance staff's responsibility are tying one hand behind their back with regard to maximizing available footage.

The practice tee root zone at Elcona is native soil and was originally planted with creeping bentgrass. This is a common combination at courses throughout the North Central Region. The use of a sand, soil, and peat moss combination for divot filling provides much better nutrient and water retention as compared to straight sand. While straight sand topdressing is commonly used to modify the upper portion of a putting green root zone, sand alone does not hold enough moisture and nutrients for quick seed germination

and growth, which are needed in the maintenance of a heavily played tee surface. The 6-2-2 mixture provides a good blend for moisture and nutrient retention, while also offering an enhancement of root zone porosity.

Although originally planted to bentgrass, the present seeding focus is perennial ryegrass. The ryegrass germinates and establishes much more quickly than bentgrass. Since the practice tee is maintained much like a fairway, fungicide applications block disease activity. On heavily trafficked surfaces like a practice range tee, a creeping bentgrass/perennial ryegrass combination allows quick divot damage recovery, while also offering some lateral stolon growth. The contrasting color and growth habits of bentgrass and perennial ryegrass are more than offset by the surface they provide. On a practice range tee the primary goal is a dense grass cover — few golfers would debate turf purity.

Once the attendants have placed the divot mix and perennial rye seed in wear patterns, moisture is vital for germination and growth. The lack of water blocks germination or results in seedling loss. Too much water enhances disease development and turf weakening, not to mention poor playability. The solution is hand watering with a hose that can be pulled out even while members are practicing. To accommodate this need, Tom built a spool-mount hose coil that makes it easy for the attendants to lightly water without interfering with tee usage. When watering is complete, the hose can be quickly re-coiled out of the way.

With more and more people playing golf, proper course maintenance is a growing challenge. Give the three strategies being combined at Elcona some thought as you look to *maximize available footage* on your course's practice range tee.

BOB BRAME is the Director of the North Central Region and works out of Covington, Kentucky. He visits courses in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio, where the superintendents are full of good turf tips.