

Temporary Sanity

A year-round approach to maintain your aprons as they need to be — firm and dry!

by LARRY GILHULY

SCENE 1: It is midsummer at the golf course and you are facing a shot into the wind with a hole location close to the front edge on the first hole. The greens have been very firm all week; the only shot is the favored bump-and-run off the front apron. The shot is executed perfectly; however, the ball stops in its tracks on the apron. Frustration begins to set in, but it is the rub of the green and you move on. A similar situation occurs on No. 2, but this time you decide to fly the ball to the green. The ball hits firmly, takes several hops and is on the back collar. After 18 holes of this guessing game, you decide that it can't be your fault. I know — let's blame the superintendent!

Scene 2: It is the fall, winter, or early spring (depending on your climate) and the weather has finally turned nice for a change. You can't wait to go out and get the rust off the clubs and play a quick 18. The birds are chirping, the

sun warms your bones, and the air is fresh. Life is great and so is the golf, until you notice the mowed out temporary green in the fairway on the first hole. After eight more of these "greens" to test your sanity, you decide nine is enough and wonder why you can't always play the regular greens. I know — let's blame the superintendent!

Believe it or not, these two scenes reflect a glaring weakness of one of the most important, yet overlooked, portions of the golf course — the aprons or approaches in front of the greens. Let's take a closer look at the problem and offer simple solutions that can fall within any budget to reduce player complaints. After all, who wants to hear, "It's the fault of the superintendent"?

What is the Apron, and Why is it so Important?

You will not get an argument from anyone that the putting surfaces con-

stitute the highest priority for golfers. With one half of the shots in a hypothetical "perfect" round designated as putts, it is extremely important that putting greens be as smooth and consistent as possible. The practices of light and frequent topdressing, vertical mowing, grooming, low mowing, spoon-feeding fertilizer, rolling, and careful irrigation have all been practiced for years to produce the surfaces desired by the majority of the players. By throwing in the more recent change to spikeless alternatives and the use of growth regulators, is there any reason for anyone to miss a putt? Oh yeah, I forgot that little *ability* issue!

While the putting surfaces require 50% of the strokes on their surfaces in a hypothetical perfect round of golf, another 25% are hit *to the greens*. This represents the second highest percentage of required shots; thus, the area that surrounds the greens should receive the second highest priority for



Mowed-out fairways for "temporary" greens are acceptable for a short time, but they shouldn't be mistaken for "alternate" greens.



Aeration and heavy topdressing are used to prepare approach areas for use as temporary greens.

maintenance. This area encompasses the bunkers, the rough, and the collars that surround the greens on both sides and to the rear.

All three of these locations are important. None is as important, however, as the area directly in front of the greens. The 10-15-yard apron, including the collar, is simply too vital to overlook based on its importance on how the game is played when dry conditions exist and in providing a highly attractive alternative for the *temporary* syndrome associated with mowed-out circles on the fairways. Do you have one of the scenes described earlier played out on your golf course year in and year out? Do you notice lots of ball marks directly in front of the greens? Are you forced to stretch your sanity when dealing with temporary greens during the winter months? If you answered yes to any or all of the above, perhaps the following program can give both the golfers and the maintenance staff more tranquility as they address this less-than-easy game.

Treat the Aprons Like Greens — to a Point!

One of the great things about the golf industry is the way the golf course maintenance equipment manufacturers listen to and respond to the needs of the golf course superintendent. Over the years, many labor-saving devices have been invented and many examples of high-quality mowers have hit the market during the past decade. At the same time, the cost of golf has risen

dramatically along with the predictable demands for more “perfection” as witnessed every weekend on more than one major television network. Where will it stop? Can’t answer that one, but there are certain practices used during the past decade that make sense for every golf course, while not breaking the budget. One of these practices is the philosophy of treating the aprons (10-15 yards in front of the greens) the same as the greens. The arguments against this practice have been heard many times, and include:

- “We don’t have the labor.”
- “We don’t have the equipment.”
- “We don’t have the time.”
- “We don’t have the . . .”

Before going forward, go back and reread the subtitle to this section, “Treat the aprons like the greens — to a point.” The proposal for upgrading the aprons does not include rolling, vertical mowing, grooming, or changing mowing heights. If you are already using growth regulators, following careful irrigation practices, and spoon-feeding, these programs should not change. Assuming the aprons on your golf course are already well drained, the only practices that need to be focused on are regular aeration and topdressing. Now, many of you may be saying, “But I already aerify the aprons twice yearly, followed by topdressing.” Good start! Now expand the topdressing program to the same schedule as the greens (every two to four weeks, depending on the growth rate) to minimize the impact of excess thatch. Still suffering from the “we don’t have the” syndrome? Golf course equipment manufacturers have come to your rescue.

Aeration and Regular Light Topdressing — the Key to Quality Aprons

As noted earlier, golf course equipment manufacturers have been very responsive to the needs of the golf course superintendent. When superintendents mentioned that a faster method of topdressing greens was



By regularly topdressing the approach areas, a green-type profile can be established over time.

needed, larger drop-type topdressers were introduced. When superintendents said that still faster units were needed, spin topdressers were introduced. Finally, when superintendents asked for topdressers that were fast, accurate, and have the ability to spread wet sand, the manufacturers went to work and have produced outstanding equipment that has revolutionized green topdressing. These new spin units have taken away the "I don't have enough labor, time, and equipment" excuses and replaced them with aprons that are now of the proper firmness to accept an intended "bump-and-run" shot. Soft, thatchy aprons have been replaced with upper surfaces that are similar to the greens, and localized dry spots have been reduced. In short, if you have not already adopted this program, give it a "spin." You and your players will appreciate the results.

Wait! There's Still More!

If improving the aprons for summer play through regular aeration and frequent topdressing isn't enough of a compelling reason to consider this modification in your program, how about those of you still saddled with the temporary greens during the fall, winter, and spring? The other major advantage of upgrading the aeration and topdressing program during the growing season is the ability to change from the temporary philosophy to an alternative approach. A temporary green is just what the name implies. It won't be around long and is just a stopgap measure until the frost, frozen, thawing, or excessively wet conditions are gone. While it should be noted that golf courses should remain closed during frost, thawing, and wet conditions, there are many areas of the country that could use "alternate" greens during frozen times of the year or when greens require a rest for maintenance. The very nature of the word "alternate" implies a site that is nearly equal to the regular green. Based on personal experience and the observations of many, the use of alternate greens greatly reduces complaints and slows down the desire to get back on the regular greens before they may be ready for play. In addition, using the aprons as alternate green sites brings the bunkers into play and can often produce some very interesting shots over or near water hazards. Finally, the need to prepare 18 temporary green sites on selected fairway areas is eliminated since the aprons are already treated like greens and the



Who enjoys playing golf with this type of condition?

mowing heights are generally slightly lower than the fairways.

Is there a downside to this two-for-the-price-of-one program for the aprons? Of course. The aprons will experience additional wear and some turf loss during the winter; thus, the larger the area topdressed and aerified, the less potential for damage. The mowers that are used to cut the aprons during the growing season will become dull faster and cause the mechanic more grief, but the upside is hard to overlook. Inevitably, some players will hit shots that will land on the regular greens. With the exception of frost, however, no long-term damage should occur since it is concentrated traffic that causes problems on greens during the off-season. Simply letting the players putt off the greens onto the aprons is far more acceptable than trying to make a putt on a mowed-out patch of fairway. Finally, not all aprons will be conducive to this idea since

so many greens are either elevated or heavily contoured in front of the greens. These holes obviously will require a different approach that should match the other alternate greens.

Generally speaking, the lack of regular aeration and light topdressing on the aprons arguably has been the most overlooked area of maintenance on golf courses for several decades. While greens and bunkers demand hours of daily maintenance, taking the funds and the time to upgrade the aprons will pay great dividends down the road. You, too, can change the insanity of temporary greens into the sanity of alternate greens with this modest program.

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