

Maybe It's Time for a Change

Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet.

BY PAUL H. VERMEULEN

With each passing year, a growing number of golf course superintendents are finding it increasingly difficult to manage greens established with older turfgrasses. The driving force behind this trend can be traced back to the rallying cry for higher Stimpmeter readings that necessitate mowing greens at ever lower cutting heights. To put things in perspective, superintendents have all but given up measuring cutting height on a scale of common fractions, e.g. $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch, because it is no longer accurate enough for maintenance programs that focus on microscopic adjustments of 5 thousandths of an inch.

Cutting height plays a pivotal role in putting green management as it can be used to increase the Stimpmeter reading by influencing the harvest of green tissue. Since green tissue contains the photosynthetic machinery that turns water and carbon dioxide into life-sustaining carbohydrates, however, lowering the cutting height can literally cause the turf to slowly starve to death. The breaking point between satisfying golfers' craving for fast greens and mowing the turf to the brink of extinction is different for each course. That being said, you know you are close to this point when weak fungal pathogens, such as anthracnose, become unusually difficult to control and thinning of the turf allows moss to become a permanent resident in the putting surface.

Do any of these problems sound disturbingly familiar? Perhaps they should, since they are all common themes of the Regional Updates on the Green Section's website (www.usga.org/green). When rotating fungicide applications

and drenching moss with everything under the kitchen sink does not take care of the greens' problems anymore, everybody wants to know what to do next. Agronomically, the best course of action is to raise the cutting height, give the turf a pinch of extra fertilizer, and turn a deaf ear to golfers when they comment about slow greens. Unfortunately, this is not the solution golfers are really seeking, and it is certainly not the kind of message a superintendent looks forward to passing along to a green chairman.

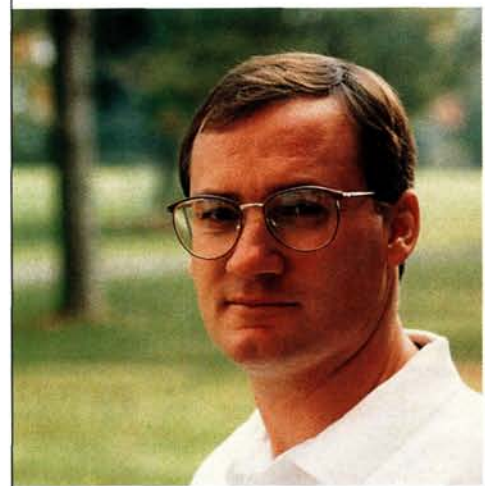
In high-pressure situations, raising the cutting height and slowing down the speed of the greens is, at best, a temporary solution. The simple reason is that there are always going to be courses with fast greens that golfers are going to use as a convenient comparison to put pressure on the superintendent, either real or perceived, to lower the cutting height again. Not fair? Absolutely not, but that is the kind of rotten hand many superintendents have been dealt.

If playing a losing hand year after year is no longer acceptable, then maybe it's time for a change. To start, let's accept the premise that golfers may not be completely out of line when they ask for better year-round putting conditions. It's radical, to be sure, but if they truly want something better, how about proposing a new stand of turf?

Assuming that the old turf on the greens has genetic limitations that cannot be overcome via more aeration, more pesticides, and more man-hours, one way to improve putting conditions is to fumigate and replant with a turfgrass variety or varieties specifically bred to be maintained at a lower cutting

height. In the last decade, turfgrass breeders have worked diligently to produce a plethora of new warm- and cool-season varieties that have greater heat tolerance, better disease resistance, finer texture, and deeper root development. Combined, these attributes make it possible to maintain greens at 0.125 of an inch throughout the entire golfing season in many areas of the country.

Replanting greens with an improved variety or varieties is not easy, nor can it be done in the blink of an eye, but Rome was not built in a day, either. If golfers truly want better putting conditions and they are willing to foot the bill and give up the course for a season, change can really be a worthwhile endeavor.



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