

Snowmobile Use on the Golf Course

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Snowmobiling is growing in popularity throughout the northern snow-covered areas of the country. The sport is full of thrills, spills and fun, but is the golf course the best place for the snowmobile? This article will attempt to show some of the effects of snowmobile use on golf courses in the northeastern United States, and offer some thoughts on how to avoid possible turf injury where they are used.

Snowmobile damage falls into two categories. Mechanical injury, which is visible and seen when it occurs. This is the broken limbs, rundown trees and gouged earth. Then there is the more subtle, yet more severe ice injury. It only shows itself in the spring after the packed ice and snow clears and the memory of winter snowmobiling fades.

Mechanical Damage

When the snowmobilers take off, the thought of intentionally causing damage is far from their minds. But the inherent nature of the sport is to strike out and "explore" areas of the course. It takes the riders to hills and dales previously seen only while searching for a badly hit shot during the summer. It also involves climbing and descending steep hills and mounds to prove the traction and power that the dealer assured us the vehicle possesses. However unin-

tentional the action, some damage usually occurs. As seen in Figure 1, a snowmobile tipped over on its side, some gasoline spilled out, and apparently flowed down the groove made by the snowmobile's track. This elongated strip of dead turf appeared the next spring after the snow melted.

Figure 2 illustrates the scuffing of frozen grass and what can happen when an area void of snow is driven over with a snowmobile. The damage is similar to that of walking on frozen greens: the grass plant is crushed, the blade desiccates and turns brownish-white.

Another type of mechanical injury is that of vandalism by both riders and non-riders. It involves broken limbs, run-down shrubs, small trees and evergreens, etc. With snowmobiles and possibly sledding on the course, people other than members are on the property using it as a winter playground. It has been our experience that these people do not exercise prudent care of the course. For that matter, even the members are often careless when the course is used for purposes other than golf.

Ice Injury

As the snowmobiles travel over and over the same area, the snow is packed tight and ice is formed. Packed snow and ice is perhaps the

Figure 1. Spilled gasoline from a snowmobile caused this damage.





Figure 3. Dead fairway turf resulting from a snowmobile trail made during the winter.

most severe type of condition caused by the snowmobile. The insulated layer of oxygen that occurs with a normal snow cover is no longer present, and the turf is subjected to an environment void of oxygen. The grass under this ice cover is much more susceptible to snow mold and freezing and thawing damage. Figure 3 graphically shows dead turf resulting from a

snowmobile trail down the center of the fairway. The damage was caused by a combination of ice injury and snow mold. The grass species that appears to be most susceptible is *Poa annua*. This does not mean that other varieties are immune. They are susceptible but to a lesser degree. One other consideration is that if the permanent grasses are thinned out over winter, *Poa annua* invasion is enhanced. This usually means a setback in the permanent grass population of the fairway and a maintenance headache to the superintendent for years to come.

Snowmobiles On The Course

There are several outstanding reasons for the use of snowmobiles on the golf course. Membership pressure is one. A club member's family has a snowmobile and what better place to ride it than at the course. Also, if there is a drive underway for new members in the club, what better incentive can be offered than year-around recreational facility. Golf in the spring, summer and fall supplemented by winter paddle tennis and snowmobiling.

The main reason for permitting their use appears to be monetary. Their use on the course can keep the food services at the clubhouse operating at an increased volume and tempo through the winter. Also, the rental of club-owned snowmobiles can be another revenue source. The capital investment for this purchase can be returned in several years with a profit, if there is a good, long-lasting snow cover and the vehicle is properly managed and maintained.

Precautions to Take

If snowmobiles are used on the course, here are some precautions to take in order to minimize possible turf damage:

1. With the possibility of physical injury to the riders, the question will arise, "does the



Figure 2. Tracks left by a snowmobile as it traveled over a frozen green.

club have proper insurance coverage?" If not, it should be obtained.

2. Carefully regulate and enforce areas where the snowmobiles may travel. Set up trails to keep the riders in the woods and rough as much as possible. Cross fairways only when absolutely necessary.

3. Stay away from greens, tees, approaches and landing areas of fairways.

4. Educate the riders in proper etiquette of snowmobile use in order to minimize damage to the course, the vehicle and the riders themselves.

5. Operate the vehicles only when there is a minimum of six inches of snow on the ground.

6. Do not operate the machine during the spring thaw when the snow is wet and melting. This increases the possibility of ice damage.

7. On areas of possible use, apply an extra application of snow mold preventive fungicide in the fall, and when the snow clears in the

spring. This reduces the possibility of damage by snow mold.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show some of the pros and cons of snowmobile use on the golf course. Enthusiasts will paint a rosy picture for their use, and in some cases little injury actually occurs. But, speaking from an agronomic point of view, we would say without reservation that the golf course is not the best place to operate snowmobiles. Winter revenue generated from their use can be lost in an increased maintenance budget for repair of damage done directly or indirectly by them. The course, if damaged, will also be slower to recover in the spring and will reach its top playing condition much later in the season. Unfortunately, some golfers may feel the poor turf is a reflection of the superintendent's turf management program. Rather, the real culprit is the heavy traffic and course use by snowmobiles during the winter.

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