



Rolling putting greens produces faster and smoother putting surfaces without the need to lower mowing heights.

Preparing Your Greens For That All-Important Tournament

Plan ahead by thinking backwards.

by STANLEY J. ZONTEK

NOT EVERY GOLF COURSE hosts the U.S. Open Championship each year. However, almost every golf course does hold some type of important golf tournament. The list of events can be long: a regional or sectional qualifying event; a tournament for charity; a state amateur, junior, or professional event; or that very special member-guest tournament that the golf course prides itself in.

There are a number of practices a golf course superintendent can use to prepare the golf course for that special tournament. It may not be the U.S. Open, but it is just as important to have

the course, and particularly the greens, look and play their best. Play away!

Green Speed

Right or wrong, having the greens putt faster for a special golf event is almost always required. Seldom is the regular daily green speed considered adequate. If by chance it is, then skip this section. If it is not, read on.

The challenge for the turf manager is to provide faster green speeds for the tournament without threatening the health of the turf. It is an agronomic over-simplification to think that simply lowering the mowing height will

achieve faster greens. Without proper preparation, lowering the height can scalp the turf. Following are some of the practices that are used to accommodate the desire for faster greens. In selecting and scheduling these programs, much depends upon how fast you want the greens to putt, and the time, machinery, and labor available to do this work.

Light Topdressing. A light topdressing program is important in preparing the greens for the tournament. This is where your *planning ahead by thinking backwards* begins. Our experience has shown that a light topdressing

should be scheduled 11-12 days before the tournament. This allows enough time for the topdressing material to settle into the turf and for debris and other loose impediments to be picked up by the greens mower. This timing before the event also allows time for the mowers to be re-lapped or sharpened before the event. Thus, work backwards in scheduling topdressing so the greens will *peak* the days of the event.

How much topdressing should be applied? The key here is to use just enough so that when the material dries, it vanishes into the grass following a light brushing and/or light irrigation. Depending upon a number of factors, such as the type of topdressing and the length of the grass on the greens, rates can range from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cubic yard of topdressing material per 5,000 square feet. NOTE: Dry topdressing material works best.

After the topdressing has been worked into the grass, lowering the mowing heights can be done more safely. Besides smoothing and firming

the putting surface, the topdressing protects the crown, or growing point, of the grass plant so that scalping injury is minimized.

How many topdressings will your greens need? It depends, but if the greens are soft and spongy, several topdressings may be needed. Again, work backwards on your calendar. If you know you should schedule a topdressing application 11-12 days before the event, schedule one or more additional light topdressings on that same schedule.

Double Cutting

Experience has shown that double cutting greens should begin about four days prior to the beginning of the practice rounds (if any). In this way, the greens should putt at the same pace for every day of the event, including the practice rounds.

The question is often asked, "Can I cut the greens once in the morning and once in the evening to achieve the same results?" The answer is, yes, with

some explanation. It generally is best to double cut greens in the morning. However, if time, weather, equipment, or the labor situation demands that you divide your mowing schedules between the morning and the evening, then yes, this operation can be split. This is better than not double cutting at all. The gain in green speed by double cutting usually is at least six inches, as measured by the Stimpmeter.

Rolling Greens

There are several types of dedicated machines designed to roll putting greens. Rolling greens produces faster and smoother putting surfaces, even without lowering mowing heights. The key is to roll the greens without damaging the grass or compacting the soil.

Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of all aspects of rolling greens. Suffice it to say, rolling greens is one of the techniques to achieve faster putting green speeds on a temporary basis.



Using soft-bristled brooms to groom the putting surface is one technique used to gently lift runners prior to cutting. The technique is labor intensive, but it's non-abrasive to the grass.

How frequently can greens be rolled? Research and field experience have shown that greens can be rolled regularly a maximum of three times per week. For special events, greens can be rolled regularly daily. If this is done, however, some type of surface aeration should be scheduled on the greens immediately following the event. Green speed gains can be impressive where greens are rolled, and speed increases of 12 to 18 inches are common.

Aeration

One of the most asked questions is, "Can or should greens be aerated prior to an important golf tournament?" This is where a distinction between a televised or major tournament and your course event can be made. For those *very special* and *rare* championships or tournaments, traditional aeration prior to the event normally is not performed unless there is a very good reason to do so. For most regular golf events, do not compromise; as the golf course superintendent, do what you believe the greens need prior to the event to keep the grass on the greens alive for the remainder of the season. Obviously, do not aerate the greens with $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch hollow tines the week prior to the event. Just make sure you schedule whatever aeration the greens need well in advance of the event so the aeration holes have time to heal.

Today our industry enjoys more types of aeration equipment than has ever been available before. You can aerate greens with $\frac{1}{4}$ - to $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch (or larger) hollow tines; solid tines; water injection; small, surface, multi-tined aerators; deep-tine aerators; drill aerators; and others. The superintendent can literally choose the technique that fits the needs of the grass and soil on the greens.

When in doubt, do not defer an aeration program solely because of the tournament. Perhaps you can use a technique that produces the least disruption to the putting surface, but do what is best for the grass, the soil, and the long-term performance of the greens. Aeration can be a good practice both to prepare the grass for the event and then, following the tournament, to relieve compaction and rebuild the turf's root system.

Fertility

Grass that is lush, fast growing, and wide leafed is more difficult to prepare for a tournament than slower-growing, finer leafed, *hungrier* grass. But there

are both extremes — grass that is over fertilized and grass that is under fertilized. Yes, you can under fertilize grass, especially when trying to achieve faster green speeds! With grass that is under fertilized, there is a tendency to lose density. Ball marks become agonizingly slow to heal, and greens lack density and tend to spike mark more than greens with better turf density.

How can you achieve this balance between lush, dense grass and thin, under-fertilized grass, especially when preparing greens for a tournament? The answer could be by fertilizing the greens, especially in the weeks leading up to the tournament, with a light, *spoonfeeding* putting green fertility program. Typically, this involves the

event. Not too much growth, and not too little. Some trial and error may be involved in terms of timing, rates, and individual fertilizer products. Nonetheless, by spraying soluble fertilizers on the grass, you can always add more material if it is needed. With granular fertilizers, once the material is down, it is down. You cannot remove an excess. A spoonfeeding program is another tool, another option, to utilize in preparing your greens for that special tournament.

Surface Preparation

Years ago, another title for this section could have been *controlling grain*. The fact is, the effect of grain on the roll of a ball is overstated today. When putting greens were cut at $\frac{1}{4}$ inch,



Brushing lifts runners so they can be trimmed easily.

application of a minimum of $\frac{1}{10}$ th to a maximum of $\frac{1}{4}$ pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet, normally using a complete N-P-K fertilizer blend that is sometimes enhanced with iron and other micronutrients. These liquid applications of fertilizer, using the greens sprayer, can be made to the greens on a 7- to 10-day interval beginning at least a month prior to the tournament. Essentially, this replaces granular fertilizers, with their inherent peaks-and-valleys responses, with multiple, light applications of sprayable fertilizers. It allows the superintendent to have better control of the growth of the grass prior to and even after a tournament. You do not want to have a granular fertilizer *release* during the

especially on bermudagrass greens, the effect of grain was real. With today's greens commonly maintained at $\frac{1}{2}$ nds of an inch or less, grain simply does not have a chance to develop. Today, when television announcers mention grain, the effect is more likely due to the slope and the contour of the green, not the way the grass plant grows.

Nonetheless, surface preparation is still important. The smoother the ball rolls without bouncing and the truer the ball tracks, the better the putting surface will be for that member-guest tournament or for the U.S. Open Championship.

Some surface preparation techniques have already been mentioned. The act of working light rates of topdressing

material into the grass lifts runners and prostrate leaf blades, which are then cut off. Topdressing also fills small depressions, resulting in a smoother putting surface with less bouncing of the ball as it rolls. Topdressing helps firm a putting surface, which reduces the effects of footprints or other traffic.

Double cutting and rolling are other forms of surface preparation, as are light grooming or vertical mowings. The need for these last two operations is up to the golf course superintendent. If the putting surface is thick and matted prior to the tournament, vertical mowing of the grass, along with light topdressing, will help thin it out.

Mechanical groomers, if not set too deeply, help to groom the putting surface by lifting and cutting the horizontal leaves and stems. Care should be taken not to schedule these operations too close to the event, since the grass needs time to heal. These are abrasive techniques, and they can shock the grass. In my opinion, little should happen mechanically to the grass on the greens the week prior to the event except double cuttings, rollings, etc.

A less-abrasive technique to groom and prepare the putting green surface is to literally broom them. Long-handled brooms with soft bristles can be used to gently lift runners prior to cutting and enhance putting green quality before and even during an event. The technique is labor intensive, but it is perhaps the best surface preparation technique the superintendent can use immediately before and during the tournament. A benefit of this technique versus mechanical grooming is that weak areas in the outer edges of the greens, or on high or low spots, are much easier to avoid with brooms than is possible with machines.

Chemical Applications

This is another area where the superintendent needs to *plan backwards*. The superintendent should avoid having a sprayer out on the course to control disease or insects during the event. Grass that is white with a chemical spray or has a strange odor does not reassure golfers, and it is bad public relations.

Most superintendents have a favorite chemical spray that lasts a long time and controls a broad range of diseases that could occur during the tournament. This spray should be applied, preventatively, a few days before the event so the residual, or length of control, lasts through the days of the

tournament. The same rationale exists for insecticide applications. Experience, planning, and common sense are critical in planning pesticide applications so that the turf is disease- and insect-free for the tournament.

Irrigation

Wet greens are soft greens. Wet greens are slow greens. Wet greens have more disease problems. Wet greens are problem greens. Sometimes the golf course superintendent cannot control the amount of water the course receives. Additionally, the golf course superintendent might not be allowed to cut down trees, prune limbs, remove underbrush, or even install a fan in order to improve the grass-growing environment over and around a green. Sunlight and improved air circulation help a green dry out and help the turf to thrive. Suffice it to say, when preparing greens for tournament play, a good green is a dry, firm green.

When possible, hand water greens prior to and through the event. Normally, it is not a good idea to soak greens prior to the tournament or on the days of the practice rounds. Worse yet is to water greens simply to soften them up (usually requested by one segment of golfers). Never intentionally water the approaches or fronts of greens to make the golf course play harder.

Keep perimeter irrigation to a minimum. After all, perimeter irrigation systems that use full-circle sprinkler heads tend to concentrate water in the middle of the greens, where most of the heads overlap. Thus, use the perimeter irrigation system only when necessary, and supplement all irrigation by hand watering the greens, including the collars, mounds, or other *hot spots*.

One final point. Hand watering is too important an operation to delegate to anyone other than your best employees. As with spoonfeeding greens, you can always go back and add more water to an area, but once the soil becomes too wet, it's hard to remove the excess. The goal should be a light, frequent watering program to maintain firm greens without compromising the health of the grass.

Manicuring/Detailing the Golf Course

Space does not allow for all of the details of course manicuring and presentation that can be so important in preparing your golf course for an

important tournament. A quick list of items includes: new tee towels, new or freshly painted tee markers, fresh soap and clean water in ball washers, new flags and flagsticks, new hole liners, properly functioning rakes in the bunkers, edged and hand-raked bunkers. Take some extra time just prior to the event to fix non-repaired or poorly repaired ball marks on greens and divot marks on tees and fairways. Also, re-mark water hazards, provide a clean and neat practice tee, blow leaves from greens, tees, and fairways, and make sure your course is well trimmed.

Also consider saving the best hole locations and reserving areas on tees, especially on par-3 holes, so the golfers who play the course will have the best grass on your greens and tees. You should work with the golf professional and/or tournament chairman to save the best putting green and tee locations. Basically, the goal is to present a neat and manicured golf course. This *attention to details* is so very important. These things golfers see when they play your course.

Finally, how about addressing the issue of *going spikeless*, or using alternative spikes for the event? It is amazing to see the difference in putting quality between using the traditional metal spike with the raised metal shoulder and the spikeless or alternative spiked golf shoes. Some traction may be sacrificed on some surfaces and in some situations, just as with metal spikes, but there is no denying that the greens and the quality of the putting surfaces are improved. This is something to consider. Also, it is a very tangible way that golfers can influence, in a positive sense, how the greens on their golf course look and play.

In summary, the reputation of every golf course is either enhanced or hurt by the condition of the golf course during an important golf tournament. Consider the items discussed in this article. Some may be appropriate for your golf course; some may not.

Finally, today's golf course superintendent is an essential member of the team that prepares and presents a golf course to the players and their guests. Be part of this team. Long hours go into the preparation of the golf course for a tournament. And, when invited, enjoy the social aspects of a golf tournament. After all, you deserve it!

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