

# “Been Doing It That Way For Years . . . Never Had a Problem!”

It's time to rethink some of those “time-honored” practices. by DAVID A. OATIS

THE TITLE of this opinion article is a quote I have heard from contractors and architects many times over the years, and generally it is used in defense of improper or questionable methods of construction. I'll be the first to acknowledge that there are “many ways to skin a cat” and we must always keep our eyes and minds open for new and better ways. However, there are some methods that are virtually guaranteed to produce poor results, and there are certain risks that just aren't worth taking.

“Poor results” often are very difficult to document and quantify, since they may not actually result in turfgrass death. Anyone can see dead grass or the loss of a green, but poor performance is tougher to quantify. Shoddy construction methods often result in increased maintenance costs and unnecessary golfer disruption. These are things golfers pay for in the form of increased maintenance costs and the superintendent pays for in bad publicity.

Let's take putting green construction as an example. There are many ways to build greens, but certain aspects of putting green construction should not be compromised. It usually is prudent to add some organic matter or soil to sand in order to produce a better turfgrass-growing medium. Based on the USGA environmental research done to date, one could even say that it is environmentally irresponsible to build greens out of a clean, straight sand. We know that straight-sand greens will leach more nutrients and pesticides than a well-formulated mix of sand and organic matter or soil. You may save a few dollars up front by leaving out the organic matter or soil, but you'll spend more later in maintenance. No doubt the savings will be highly publicized, but the increased maintenance costs will be lost in the shuffle.

Regardless of what mix is selected, it only makes sense to install the best drainage system possible. Yet there are those who knowingly risk the owner's investment in greens by installing drainage systems that have a high probability of failure and cannot be

flushed out if they become clogged. Yes, a few dollars are saved initially and, once again, you can be sure everyone will hear about “the savings.” But what happens when the drains plug up a few years later and can't be flushed out? The superintendent no doubt will handle the problem somehow, but it probably will cost the golfers a lot more money in the long run.

Then there is bunker renovation. A favorite trick is to save a few dollars by not removing the bunker sand when the old bunkers are rebuilt. The contractor promises to rototill the old bunker sand into the surrounding soil or perhaps bury it in a large pit adjacent to the bunker. Unfortunately, the result is usually the same. The soil mixture that results from the sand and soil being mixed together is rarely uniform and is usually droughty, structure-less, and incapable of supporting healthy turfgrass. The buried sand, even when capped by a layer of topsoil, invariably shows up when an extended drought is experienced. The problems usually are masked for a year or two by the sod, a good irrigation system, or perhaps favorable weather. Eventually, the turf slowly declines or an extended drought brings the problem to everyone's attention.

By this time, it is usually too late. Final payments have been made and the responsible parties are nowhere to be found. They are off at another course expounding the same tired old line, “This method is fine — been doing it that way for years!”

Golf's popularity currently is at an all-time high and the economy is very strong, so it seems that most courses are undertaking construction or renovation projects. As it normally goes, a course invites an architect and/or contractor to submit a proposal. When the golf course superintendent questions the materials or methods specified, the typical response is, “. . . been doing it that way for years . . .” In some cases, particularly when a highly regarded architect or contractor is involved, course officials may be irritated or even embarrassed by the questions or

protests raised by their superintendent. When this occurs, the course officials may respond, “. . . who are you to question these professionals? They do this for a living!”

Of course, architects and contractors are aware of this typical reaction and may even play it up. The concerns of the superintendent may be casually dismissed with rolled eyes and a disdainful comment to the effect that “every other superintendent I've worked with has been able to grow grass successfully with this method.”

My response is, *of course you've never had a problem with this construction method. You've already been paid and are long gone by the time the turf problems become obvious!* By that time, it is the superintendent who is shouldering the responsibility of the poor quality work and trying to make the best of an unnecessarily bad situation.

What the course officials are forgetting is that *it is the responsibility of the golf course superintendent to represent the best interests of his or her employer*, and it is going to be the superintendent's responsibility to produce the turfgrass quality that will allow the project to work.

Now there are plenty of honest, competent architects and contractors in the industry, and my comments are not meant to suggest otherwise. Unfortunately, there also are some careless/unscrupulous ones who give everyone a bad name. Course officials need to “consider the source” when they consider the various different proposals placed before them. Carefully consider the risk/reward ratio of any shortcuts. If the risk is high, the short-term reward might just not be worth it. When in doubt, get another opinion — an unbiased one! Oh, and when they suggest you shouldn't have the Green Section involved, consider the motive!

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DAVID A. OATIS has developed a keen sense for recognizing the risk/reward ratios of golf course construction methods as Director of the Green Section's North-east Region.