

TAS CAN MAKE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE

A green chairman and golf course superintendent reintroduce the Green Section Turf Advisory Service at one golf course.

by MACK SAUNDERS



Mack Saunders, green chairman at Glen Oak Country Club (Pennsylvania), and Darrin Batisky, golf course superintendent, review one of the putting green profiles during the fall aeration of putting greens.

ANYONE who reads the *Green Section Record* is likely to be familiar with the USGA's Turf Advisory Service (TAS) and the very valuable service it provides in terms of on-site visits with golf course superintendents and Green Committees. This article will attempt to relate how one Green Committee dealt with reintroducing TAS to its golf course after a 12-year hiatus, while working with a golf course superintendent who was unfamiliar with the service and was initially skeptical about the value of such a visit. In reality, I suspect this is not an uncommon occurrence when a new green chairman is interested in a second opinion.

Glen Oak Country Club is a private club in northeastern Pennsylvania with a membership of approximately 375. The 18-hole golf course was designed and built in 1951 by Jim Harrison, an associate of the late Donald Ross. While the club's objective is to grow bentgrass greens and fairways, the reality is that most of the turfgrass is *Poa annua*.

After becoming green chairman in 1992, I began a serious search of all the golf course historical records and spent many hours with the golf course superintendent to learn as much as possible about Glen Oak's agronomics. Likewise, I met with our consulting golf course architect, Geoffrey Cornish, in an attempt to get an architect's view of the golf course. It was during this time period that I first learned of the USGA Green Section and TAS visits. More specifically, I

found a copy of a Green Section TAS visit report for Glen Oak Country Club dated July 1982.

After reviewing the TAS visit report several times, I began to inquire about the USGA Green Section and how the Turf Advisory Service program functioned. I was surprised to find our superintendent to be decidedly negative about the USGA and a bit nervous when I mentioned the 1982 TAS visit report and how I thought another such visit might be beneficial to our club.

I began to try to understand our superintendent's reluctance to participate in a TAS visit. I began contacting other golf courses in our area to inquire whether they were USGA member clubs and, if so, whether they participated in the Green Section TAS visit program. I found that many of the golf courses indeed scheduled TAS visits, and not merely on an occasional basis, but rather on an annual basis and sometimes more frequently. The Green Chairmen were very positive about the TAS visit program and felt that their golf courses had benefited directly from the visits.

In mid-1994, I decided that my club needed to involve the Green Section. We were experiencing problems with our greens with very thin grass with shallow rooting. Likewise, our fairways were not healthy and had high insect infestations, especially white grubs. Additionally, I found that most area golf courses completed spring and fall green aerifications, while our course only aerified greens once in

early October of each year. Because of this late aerification, our greens did not have sufficient time to heal prior to the onset of winter.

We decided to schedule a TAS visit during the 1994 season. As a relatively new green chairman, I knew this visit would help me learn more about turfgrass maintenance and, secondarily, to obtain an outside, unbiased review of the agronomic status of our golf course.

On September 21, 1994, Mid-Atlantic Green Section agronomist Keith Happ visited Glen Oak Country Club. As it turned out, my club was fortunate Keith visited our golf course. He immediately set the tone for his visit by his supportive and low key demeanor. During the tour of the golf course, he frequently commended some of the cultural practices he found in place and diplomatically recommended programs we should consider for improvement. We were particularly interested in the plugs cut from randomly selected greens; we found very shallow root systems whose depth of penetration was inhibited by a clay base in the subsoil. Accordingly, Keith recommended, and we implemented, fall and spring green aerification and a more sand-based topdressing material.

Our current superintendent, Darrin Batisky, looks forward to our annual visits with the current USGA agronomist, Darin Bevard. This has become a team effort.

I would like to conclude this article with my thoughts on the lessons to



A wonderful view of the Glen Oak Country Club. Our association with the USGA agronomists has helped our golf course to realize its full potential.

be learned from my experiences as a newly appointed green chairman who was apprehensive about involving the USGA.

- If you are a newly appointed green chairman, take the time to learn all you can about the agronomics of your golf course. This means researching the existing files, spending time touring the course with your golf course superintendent, and asking questions about why and how things are done.

- Don't be shy about asking questions. Many times there are good agronomic reasons why things are done a certain way.

- View the agronomists of the USGA Green Section as your partners and schedule a TAS visit at least annually. You will find that a very positive relationship develops with the USGA agronomists who visit your course. This relationship makes it easy for our staff to telephone or e-mail questions or concerns directly to their USGA agronomists. This is a valuable added benefit.

- Do not be concerned that your golf course will be embarrassed by the

TAS visit or what the report may state. Over the course of the last seven years I have never found a Green Section agronomist who is anything but fair and diplomatic, yet constructive in his feedback.

- Since the Green Section agronomists visit many golf courses every year and see varied turfgrass conditions, they are in a great position to relate their experiences from other courses they visit. In many instances, they point out new and innovative ways of doing things that are more efficient or produce better growing conditions and ultimately better playing conditions.

- Share the documented TAS visit report with your membership. It just makes good sense to let your members know how other professionals view your golf course and what they recommend for improvement. Also, it is a good idea to archive the reports, since they become a valuable historical resource about the golf course from an agronomic perspective.

- Finally, implement the recommendations contained in the TAS visit reports wherever and whenever possible.

You may not see immediate improvements, but you will see a marked positive change if you have the fortitude to make changes as recommended by these professionals.

As a final note, I can state that over the course of the last seven years the condition of our golf course has improved significantly. We have complete confidence in our staff and the USGA Green Section agronomists who work with them. Now we speak with the USGA agronomists often when we encounter problems, and we also discuss opportunities to improve our golf course. Our course and our working relationships are the better for it due to our interactions with the agronomists of the USGA Green Section.

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