

The Beer is Colder When the Grass is Greener

Course conditions can affect golfer perceptions of other club facilities.

BY JEFF HEILBRUN, CCM

Teton Pines Resort and Country Club (Jackson Hole, Wyoming) has undergone many changes in golf course management over the last few years. As general manager, I have had the mixed fortune of seeing our golf course go through some difficult times and then come out on the other side.

In the spring of 2001, we woke up from winter in shock. More than 70% of our greens were in bad shape from both pink and gray snow mold. Five of the greens had 25% healthy grass at best, and two of them were closer to 10%. Almost all of our tees were given last rites. The weather that spring was terrible, so recovery was excruciatingly slow.

Luckily, I had hired Mike Kitchen as our new golf course superintendent during the winter, so I could discuss our operation with a clear conscience, not knowing what lay beneath the snow. Our first phone call was to Matt Nelson, our USGA regional agronomist. The short-term forecast was pretty grim and, as it turned out, it was August 1st before some of our greens had any semblance of recovery.

The interesting thing to me as a general manager was that we also didn't have the best year in other parts of the operation. There were complaints about our snack bar, lounge, and food and beverage operations, and golf shop sales were down even though we didn't change the way we operated those departments. I witnessed what I now realize was evidence that our golfers were looking at the club through a lens

clouded by a golf course they could not be proud of. An end-of-the-season member survey acknowledged the poor course conditions, and asked for other comments not related to course conditions, but we still received a very high number of comments about the greens and tees.

Following new agronomic practices put into place by Mike and making diligent efforts with winter preparation, including earlier-than-normal aerification, the next spring was much better. At the same time, we still had remnants of disease. As both Matt and Mike reminded this turf-simple mind of mine, patience is a virtue and we were headed down the right path.

Enter spring 2003. Our superintendent has risen to saint status and "the grass is greener and the beer is suddenly colder." While most of this article is anecdotal, in reality the beer temperature hasn't changed. Our menus haven't changed much and the snack bar is about the same, but the golf course is dramatically different. Our members are proud of our course again, and we set records for the number of lunches served last year. Food and beverage service complaints were minimal, and our member golf events were well subscribed.

The moral of this story is that golf course conditions affect the entire club — financially, psychologically, and in many other ways. Past decisions to delay aerification until as late as possible so that our players didn't suffer putting on bumpy greens put us at great risk if

early fall weather conditions turned sour as they did in the fall of 2000. By waiting so late to aerify, we couldn't properly drag in the topdressing sand, which resulted in damaged grass leaves and aerification holes that weren't completely filled. We neglected sound agronomic practices in favor of over-concern for upsetting the golfers. The irony is that we ended up with course conditions that upset members and guests for a full season.

Now we aerify more often and agronomics come ahead of just about everything, while striking a balance with golf course access. We have a superintendent who understands the importance of the revenue side of our golf operation and instills an understanding of proper golf course care to the golf professional staff.

In this time of economic uncertainty, keeping the jewel of your operation in extraordinary condition ensures loyalty from your existing customer base and makes the rest of your golf operation look that much better to your players. By the way, you may notice a difference in your bottom line as well. Thanks to an understanding ownership, an experienced superintendent, and the services of the USGA Green Section, we're back on top of our game.

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