

GET REAL!

When maintenance programs are altered by weather, turf quality expectations need to be adjusted as well.

BY KEITH A. HAPP



“What will it hurt if one or two of us play the golf course?” In this case, the response to this commonly asked question was that it took only one person walking on an early morning, frost-covered surface to find out what it will hurt! This damage will take a long time to heal, and all of the golfers will have to wait for the green to recover from the damage caused by one golfer.

Weather patterns over the last two golf seasons have fluctuated wildly in the Mid-Atlantic Region. This offers confirmation that the business of managing golf course turf is dynamic; we are trying to manage turf during periods of extremes. Yet, when the weather changes, golfer expectations often do not. When

the sidewalks are dry, regardless of all other conditions, golfers expect the course to be ready for play. During periods of bad weather, tolerance of disruption and course closure is low. Often, the passion for the game focuses on the present and not on long-term damage that can result from playing on turf that is under extreme stress. Turf

managers plan and try to be as proactive as possible, but one thing is for sure — Mother Nature is in charge. Weather dictates what can be accomplished and, of course, what can be presented to the golfers.

Early in the spring the mantra begins, “What will it hurt?” There are always small groups of golfers who have to

play when there is frost on the greens and the soils are still frozen. How much damage can one person do? How about two, three, or five? Where do you draw the line, and who has the best interest of the course in mind? The golf course superintendent is not trying to close the course so he or she doesn't have to come to work — they are protecting the golf course, the primary asset of most facilities. "What will it hurt?" Much more than you think.

With the emergence of spring comes the need for golf course preparation. For turf, this usually centers on aeration. Core cultivation is performed, debris is collected, and topdressing is applied. It sounds simple and, in fact, this procedure is one of the basic agronomic programs used at practically every course. The logistics of aeration, particularly putting green aeration, are challenging primarily because of the efforts made to minimize golfer inconvenience. However, logistical planning really becomes burdensome when rain occurs. When aeration is performed under wet conditions, the potential for damage increases dramatically. The flexibility to alter the maintenance schedule for inclement weather is not always provided. Golfer protest against completing aeration on an alternate day can delay or eliminate the procedure altogether, potentially setting the stage for disaster later in the season. Again the mantra, "What will it hurt?" Insisting that aeration be conducted at the wrong time of year increases the time needed for healing and negatively impacts playability. Delaying aeration by a week or a month, or omitting it until late in the fall so as to not inconvenience golf, costs more than you think!

As the season progresses, a desire for faster green speed dominates conver-

sations. "What can it hurt? Just drop the height of cut so the greens will play the way we want to have them for a successful event." The ability to provide the desired playability level begins with the completion of essential treatment strategies to prepare for worst-case weather scenarios. When weather disrupts play, it may also mean that the completion of maintenance has been hampered. No one

likes a rain delay,



especially if it interrupts golf course maintenance activities during the heart of the season. It takes time to catch up on maintenance, especially mowing, and the last thing that needs to be done is to create an unnecessary stress on the turf by mowing when it can and should be avoided. When soils are saturated, turf decline begins well before visual signs are evident on the playing surface. Mowing too low and at the wrong time can result in catastrophe. "What can it hurt?" More than you think!

A certain tolerance of necessary maintenance should be afforded, and this should be accompanied by establishing an acceptable range of playing conditions. Height of cut changes should be proactive, not as a result of damage that could have been avoided. When soils become saturated, other forms of relief may be needed. Poking a hole (aeration) will make a difference, and there are relatively non-disruptive procedures that can be used to accomplish the desired effect. Tools and practices can be used to stay one step ahead of turf decline.

The mantra can be reversed. Ask golfers, "What can it hurt . . . to allow a maintenance practice to be completed?" The turf manager has to be flexible and willing to adapt to the conditions presented.

Golfers should participate in course maintenance by accepting some level of minor disruption when it is necessary to sustain the playing surfaces. It's about compromise and doing what is right. While a facility may have all of the tools that money can buy, it means little if they are not used when benefits will be provided for the turf. Weather is a variable that cannot be controlled. Maintenance programs that allow for preparation in advance of the worst possible scenario can help avoid turf decline during the heart of the season. Every turf manager wants to be as proactive as possible, and being able to adjust, adapt, and act is part of the business of managing turf. Let it happen and get real about expectations.

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