

# “As The Turf Turns”

Break the vicious cycle in your quest for perfection. **BY JAMES H. BAIRD**

**T**he dog days of summer are here again. For golf course superintendents it is a time for survival. Keeping turf alive can often mean the difference between employment and unemployment. All too often, when the turf conditions get challenging the knee-jerk reaction is to fire the superintendent. Although it can be argued that termination of employment is justifiable or that it is unfair to judge job performance based upon a whim of Mother Nature, this article has more to do with the quest for near-perfect playing conditions and how many clubs lose sight of the key ingredients while getting caught up in a vicious and costly cycle of “As The Turf Turns.”

## MAKING THE CHANGE

First, consider the costs of separating from your former superintendent — severance pay, unemployment compensation, and possibly legal fees. Next come the costs of acquiring a new superintendent — advertising and headhunter fees, administrative costs and personal time associated with screening applications and conducting interviews, and, most of all, providing a competitive salary and benefits package required to entice and sign the best qualified candidate. Hiring a new superintendent may entail increasing the operational budget by increasing staffing levels and/or purchasing more, different, and new equipment. Add to this the additional costs of salaries and employee training. These are several examples of the tangible costs involved in the turnover process. But consider the intangible costs that can occur in between superintendents, such as increased workload, stress and tension among remaining employees, and

decreased quality and productivity on the golf course. A conservative estimate is that your new superintendent will cost at least one-and-a-half times the salary of your former superintendent.

## THE HONEYMOON

Once you hire a new superintendent, now comes the time to correct a “few more” of the problems that contributed to turf loss in the first place. Notice that I did not say “all” of the problems. You allowed your former superintendents to correct some of these problems, and chances are that you will save the remainder for future superintendents. With dead turf fresh in their minds, golfers usually are more accepting of disruptive practices aimed at restoring and maintaining turf health such as aeration and tree removal. In addition to equipment, much needed improvements to infrastructure of the golf course will likely be made during your superintendent’s honeymoon period, such as a new irrigation or drainage system or a new turf care facility.

## THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Are you tracking how much this is costing your club? Well, it really does not matter because your golf course has never looked or played better, everyone is happy, and your new superintendent can do nothing wrong. Right? Wait a minute. The golf course now is in such good condition that you want practices like aeration and tree removal to stop. Furthermore, the perception is that “problems are solved,” so you cut the maintenance budget.

## THE GRADUAL DECLINE

So begins the subtle but persistent decline in turf health and playing con-

ditions. As course conditioning begins to fade, it does not take long for the superintendent’s status to change from the hero to the hunted, and thus communication channels quickly break down around the golf course. Take all of these ingredients, add some bad weather, and you end up with dead turf and the vicious cycle begins again.

## BREAKING THE VICIOUS CYCLE

Your club has just spent or continues to spend a considerable sum of money and what are you ultimately left with? Dead turf. One step forward and two steps back. And how many jobs have been lost and lives adversely affected, not to mention the negative impact on the club’s economy?

No golf course or golf course superintendent is immune to the perils of Mother Nature. Nevertheless, the best defense against turf loss is to provide your superintendent with the resources that will produce the healthiest turf and best possible playing conditions. This means developing and adhering to a set of long-range plans and golf course maintenance standards to help ensure that successful practices are retained or improved upon over time in the event that changes in personnel or course officials may occur. Learn to put up with the occasional disruption to playing conditions for the long-term betterment of the golf course. All of this can happen along with savings to the club. Imagine that!

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