

Don't Lose the Feeling

Make sure high-tech gadgets and administrative duties don't get in the way of growing grass.

BY JIM SKORULSKI

Many changes have occurred in the 20 or so years that I have been involved with golf course maintenance. Advances in equipment and science, and increased resources have allowed turf managers to provide better-conditioned golf courses. Respect for golf course superintendents, both professionally and financially, has also grown.

The duties of golf course superintendents have changed as expectations to provide high-level conditioning increase with the improvements in technology and higher maintenance costs. The role of nature in respect to golf course conditioning is often disregarded, and there is less patience for any degree of failure. Today's golf course superintendent also assumes a much greater administrative role than ever before. More time is devoted to meetings and the paperwork associated with personnel and budget management and regulatory compliance.

Computer and communication technology has also changed how golf courses are managed. Cellular phones and email have made it possible to maintain instant contact nearly anywhere in the world. Computers are invaluable for managing and tracking expenses, programming irrigation, designing work schedules, and searching the world over for information. The new office technologies have increased efficiency, but arguably those same advances have led to increased demands for accountability and instant access, and a larger administrative burden.

Successful superintendents accept their changing roles and responsibilities as a matter of survival. However, one

must wonder what long-term impact the changes have on the instincts of greenkeepers and if there is a danger in becoming too detached from the art of growing grass.

Does it really matter? True grass-grower types might be considered dinosaurs relegated to the smaller operations where resources are extremely limited. And, after all, we are meeting maintenance challenges with the help of new technology, state-of-the-art equipment, and larger and more qualified support staffs. This may be true, but there is no substitute for the instincts and the art associated with traditional greenkeeping, in operations big or small.

It is easy to become detached from the art of growing grass. It is usually an imperceptible change that begins as a superintendent is more consumed by meetings, paperwork, staff supervision, telephone calls, etc. . . . and spends less time on the golf course. Soon the assistants are relied upon to become the primary eyes in the field. Spray programs and other management decisions become more generic and are based more on calendar date than on actual need. Less consideration is given to managing specific microenvironments or adjusting practices based on changing weather. The changes may not have an initial impact on playing conditions, but they will lead to unnecessary expenditures, increased pesticide usage, and, ultimately, problems in the field.

CULTIVATE THE FEELING

So what can be done if you find yourself slipping into this scenario? Begin by reprioritizing your daily schedule.

Block out a specific time during the day to tour the golf course. Guard that time passionately from outside interruptions. Turn the cellphone off. As difficult as this may seem, you will quickly learn to enjoy the respite from intrusions while on the golf course. Use your limited time in the field to keep abreast of the turf's overall condition, pest activity, soil moisture content, and the turf's response to specific practices and chemical treatments. Mow a few greens or fairways, change some holes, putt several greens, play out of the bunkers, and become reacquainted with the golf course and greenkeeping.

Utilize an administrative assistant to help manage the office and allow you more time to devote to the golf course. The benefit of a person who can help with the countless administrative details cannot be overestimated. A computer-savvy assistant should also be expected to share in the administrative duties.

Step back, take a breath, and ask yourself if you are becoming detached from the art of traditional greenkeeping, the golf course, and nature itself. Restore some balance by making time to get back out in the field. The slight shift in priorities may spark renewed job interest and will improve your ability to succeed in the modern era of golf course maintenance.

JIM SKORULSKI is senior agronomist for the Green Section's Northeast Region.