

Quit Fooling Yourself

Are you really accomplishing anything by dusting the greens with ultra-light applications of sand?

BY BOB VAVREK

Golfers are raising the bar every year regarding expectations for firm, fast, smooth greens. One of the more common complaints heard in recent years is, “The superintendent constantly overwaters and the greens are wet, soft, and bumpy, and the ball marks pit into the surface.”

Why are greens spongy? The most common condition is excessive accumulation of organic matter in the upper soil profile. Healthy turf constantly recycles organic matter into the soil when roots, shoots, stolons, and other plant parts are replaced throughout the growing season. Soil microbes decompose the plant debris, but it can accumulate rapidly when the rate of organic matter production exceeds the rate of decomposition.

A soil physical testing lab can quantify the percentage of organic matter, but as they say here in the Dairy State, “you don’t have to open up the package to know there is limburger cheese inside.” When you have it in greens, either you know it or you are in denial. Cut a wedge of turf and you can see a dark accumulation of peat-like material at the surface. You can squeeze water from the dark layer, even though you haven’t irrigated the greens recently.

Many factors tip the scales in favor of excessive organic matter accumulation. They include overwatering, excessive fertilization, a wet/cool climate, and the use of modern, ultra-dense cultivars of bentgrass or bermudagrass.

Sometimes it’s what you don’t do that contributes to thatch buildup. A topdressing program that fails to keep pace with organic matter accumulation is often the cause of soft, wet greens.

It’s hard to acknowledge a thatch problem when you are topdressing more than ever. You may be using a walk-behind fertilizer spreader to dust greens with sand every week. Perhaps you have a state-of-the-art spinner spreader and religiously topdress greens every two weeks from spring through fall because you can knock off six putting surfaces at a time before returning to the shop for another load of sand. A spritz of water from the irrigation system and *presto*, the sand disappears into the playing surface. Life is good . . . the mowers stay sharp and you are, in fact, topdressing more than ever. “How in the world can I have a thatch problem when I topdressed my greens 28 times this year?”

Here lies the rub. It’s not how many times you apply sand to greens that determines the effectiveness of your thatch management program; it’s how much sand is being applied to the greens that makes all the difference. Sure, you are topdressing more often, but you are still not keeping pace with organic matter accumulation.

In olden days (20 years ago), you had limited options for topdressing equipment. Vicor or Lely fairway fertilizer spreaders often doubled as topdressing units. State of the art was a smooth belt/brush Mete-R-Matic that did a great job filling those big ½-inch coring holes in greens with sand every spring and fall, but it couldn’t be dialed back enough to apply light rates of sand (which was always wet) across greens. In fact, all the equipment available for topdressing basically dumped a lot of sand on the surface, and that wasn’t all bad.

The amount of sand applied to greens easily kept pace with organic

matter accumulation, and all it took was a few additional topdressings sandwiched between spring and fall coring operations. This uniform zone of topdressing can still be visible below the dark layer of organic matter accumulation in many old greens. Unfortunately, the topdressing and cultivation train has jumped the track at many courses.

Getting back on track won’t be easy, because eliminating thatch is a disruptive process, and the disruption is why unreasonable and uninformed golfers have denied some superintendents the opportunity to manage the greens properly in the first place. It’s amazing how many courses have suspended ½- to ¾-inch hollow-tine coring operations in favor of less-disruptive cultivation, such as solid deep-tine or ¼-inch hollow-tine coring.

Addressing this problem may be as simple as adjusting modern equipment to apply more sand per application. And, yes, hollow-tine core cultivation needs to be an integral part of the greens maintenance program every year.

Old greens have been pushed to their limits and beyond to provide golfers firm, fast, smooth greens for day-to-day play. Cut back on topdressing and coring operations and you will have soft, wet, bumpy greens. We are all fooling ourselves if we think we can continue to accumulate thatch on greens and still produce a high-quality putting surface.

BOB VAVREK *doesn’t fool around when it comes to making recommendations regarding topdressing and cultivation on Turf Advisory Service visits in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.*