



Superintendents must take the time to instruct and then follow up with employees throughout the year. This guidance results in an invaluable degree of quality control over all parts of the golf course.

## “Teaching Moments”

Managing the little things can make a difference to the golfers and save grass!

BY KEITH HAPP

In a perfect world, Green Committee members outline conditions for daily play and then agronomic programs are put in place to achieve the goals set forth. Once the level of expected conditioning is established, needed resources are provided to implement timely proactive maintenance strategies. Proper equipment, labor, and maintenance techniques should result in satisfied golfers. If it were only that simple!

A trend is developing. Superintendents are trying to achieve the same course preparation results with fewer people and less time to complete maintenance. Maintenance days are being lost due to the need to generate revenue and the request from members to start play earlier in the morning. It is common to see golfers at the first tee just waiting for enough light to hit the first shot of the day. The frantic race begins.

Rushing a procedure to “get it out of the way” often leads to mistakes or careless damage of the turf. This isn’t intentional. Often, an equipment

operator is just trying to give a little extra or do it a little faster to get the job done! One thing that successful golf course operations have in common is placing importance on managing the details of completing a task. Damage, especially avoidable (human error) damage, leads to frustration and results in unplanned expenditure for turf repair and recovery. When this can be eliminated, the operation is more efficient and effective at meeting course preparation goals.

Recent surveys have found that during periods of peak play for private and resort golf facilities, average course staffing levels are approximately one worker per hole. Investment in labor resources consumes about 55% to 60% of the total annual golf course maintenance budget. Whether it is a crew of five or 50, it is essential that operators of equipment are trained in all aspects of course care. This includes the details of regular tasks such as mowing turf and raking bunkers.



The following are some of the common maintenance *faux pas* seen during the visiting season. Although these mistakes are, in most instances, not committed intentionally, they often result in turf damage and can negatively impact playability.

## GREENS

1. Turning sharply on the green or on the collar. While it may not be immediately apparent, bruised turf is compromised, and this condition can easily result in disease infection, weed encroachment, or even turf loss. The time of year this occurs makes a difference. Adjusting procedures early in the year will minimize potential for serious damage in the summer. Instruct operators to make wide turns in the intermediate or primary rough surrounding the green. Focusing on quality rather than expediency will pay off. Golfers can participate by allowing sufficient time to complete essential preparation tasks. Nothing is more important than having time to prepare putting greens for play.

2. Not emptying grass-catching baskets frequently enough, especially before the outside pass of the green (clean-up pass) is mowed. When the greens are mowed before play in the morning, often there is dew on the grass. This moisture increases the weight of the clippings collected in the basket, causing problems when the mower is lowered onto the putting surface. Abruptly dropping the mower onto the playing surface can result in scalping of the turf canopy. It takes time to develop a feel for the particular mower used to complete mowing tasks. Reduce the risk of damage by telling operators to empty baskets when they are half full.

It is not uncommon for the outside cleanup pass on the green to be skipped once or twice per week to provide relief from focused mower wear. When this area is mowed, clipping harvest will be greater compared to other portions of the green. If the grass is wet, there is increased potential for mower damage. Suggest that baskets be emptied before the outside pass is completed.

Bruising from these *faux pas* is more frequently seen during the summer, especially during environmental extremes such as high humidity or while the turf is under drought stress. Once again, adjusting procedures early in the year will make a difference later in the season.

3. Failure to inspect equipment (mower or backpack blower) before use. Check to see that the gas cap is tight. Check grease fittings on the rollers of mowers. The operator may not see gas splash from the tank or grease fall off the machine in the early morning when trying to complete mowing before golfers get on the course. They will, however, see it later when the grass is dead.

4. Inattention to clipping dispersion. Under the Rules of Golf, a player can receive relief if his or her ball comes to rest in grass clippings that are piled for removal. Wet clippings are

Providing incomplete instructions can produce results that will be visible for weeks. Pictured are the results of an employee who was too aggressive in spot-treating clover. Better instruction may have avoided this problem.



One or more passes through standing water can result in long-lasting turf damage. Establish mowing guidelines and reinforce procedures that will help to avoid unnecessary damage.



difficult to spread. While it may take time, find out-of-play areas for dispersing clippings. Dumping clippings next to the green never works well.

5. Repeated abrupt change of direction on collars will result in damage. Rolling is a frequently used practice to prepare putting surfaces for daily play. The damage from rolling occurs most frequently where the unit is turned. The turf on the collars and even approaches can suffer from concentrated mechanical wear. Abrupt turning and rapid change in direction result in compromised turf health, and bruising becomes apparent in the middle of the summer. Suggest that the machine come to a complete stop, allowing for gradual acceleration back across the green.

Scattering the clippings from a mower basket sounds simple. It is one aspect of mowing that has to be taught and then reinforced during the season. No relief is provided to the golfer when a ball rests in piled grass clippings that are not destined for removal.

## BUNKERS

1. Edges become worn and/or damaged from focused traffic just outside of the margin of the hazard. Rake the edges of a bunker from inside rather than walking a path into the grass around the outside edge of the sand. Avoid developing a *cow trail*. A playability issue can be eliminated and turf damage can be minimized. If it is

necessary to rake the edges from outside the bunker, then it may be prudent to use a special rake with an extended handle.

2. Repeatedly entering and exiting a bunker at the same spot. If possible, alter the point of entry to and exit from a bunker when raking is performed. Minimize the potential for dragging sand out of a bunker. Sand anywhere other than on the putting surface is not a loose impediment. Stress the importance of not altering the defined margin of a hazard.

3. Tracking sand from a bunker across the approach of the green. Avoid traveling across the approach to get to the next bunker. Sand will stick to tires if it is wet. Sand is often tracked on the approach, creating a difficult playing condition and poor appearance. In this case, the shortest distance between two points may not be the best path. Driving around behind the green to the next bunker is a better option.

4. Not using the correct tool to manage undulating terrain. Define which tools will be used to manage turf around a bunker to minimize scalping damage. The direction in which the turf is mowed makes a difference. When mowing is performed, make every effort not to blow the grass clippings on the green.







It is amazing how many golfers think that anyone can be put on a mower or other machine and the task will be completed without any complications. Superintendents know from experience that there is a window of opportunity to train a new employee in the spring. The margin for error early in the season is greater due to less stressful weather conditions. However, later in the season, when environmental conditions become harsher, the simplest of mistakes can result in turf loss and frustrated golfers.

Operating a machine is the first step, but instruction in the nuances and explanations of consequences of improper operation of that machine/tool are significant elements in achieving the desired outcomes. How tasks are completed makes a difference. Improper technique can lead to problems that often do not express themselves until later in the growing season.

When training is conducted, emphasis should be placed on controlling as many stress variables as possible. It is unrealistic to expect that everything can be covered during an instruction session, but if supervision is available, it is realistic to take advantage of *teaching moments*. A teaching moment is the opportunity to further instruct an equipment operator, and it is usually conducted

immediately after a problem or damage has occurred. Being able to do so depends greatly on having good supervisory personnel.

The instructors consist of key personnel who are capable of training new employees. They are familiar with defined procedures and can communicate them to others in an understandable manner. They may be familiar with many types of problems or common mistakes made by new employees because they may have committed a maintenance *faux pas* themselves.

Every effort should be made not to limit resources for labor to the point that supervision and follow-up with the staff are compromised. If key employees such as the superintendent and assistant superintendent are completing tasks, they may not be able to monitor maintenance activity and make the necessary adjustments. It is all too common to see the results of correctable errors and damage after the fact. All employees should be offered some level of feedback regarding the finished product of their work. No doubt, there will always be a need to fine-tune procedures and techniques.

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Turning the mower sharply on a green or collar can result in turf damage that will be slow to recover. Take advantage of a teaching moment to reinforce the importance of how and where equipment should be operated.