

Ski Season

Golf courses provide recreational opportunities throughout the year, even when it snows.

BY MATT NELSON

Golf courses are valuable community assets in many ways, providing open space within urban communities and an important component to landscape conservation. In addition, they can provide valuable sources of wildlife habitat and filter storm water. Turfgrass has been shown to mitigate air pollution, reduce noise and glare, provide a cooling effect, and sequester carbon from the atmosphere. Golf courses also contribute to the social and economic fabric of communities. Sales revenue, real estate enhancement, employment opportunities, and support of the local service industry all can be linked to golf. Numerous golf facilities host weddings, meetings, or retreats, provide a venue for high school cross-country meets, or provide educational opportunities for youth. Across much of the northern U.S. and Canada, golf courses also are a perfect venue for Nordic skiing. With a few considerations, premiere Nordic skiing conditions can be offered with minimal risk to the turf and playability of the golf course the next spring.

The key to good Nordic skiing on the golf course without compromising turf or playing quality is a reasonable plan. Among the most important considerations for skiing on the golf course is to select appropriate routes for trails, and keep skiers on them. Grooming designated Nordic ski trails with dedicated implements that establish a track is best. This trail helps prevent skiers from going just anywhere across the golf course and allows the turf manager to designate the most appropriate skiing locations. Snow machines with tow-behind grooming attachments are widely used at reasonable cost. These



Winter activities can showcase the golf course as a year-around community asset.

units typically are easy to operate and establish a good surface for both classic and skate skiers. Some facilities have invested in more elaborate grooming equipment, which is considerably more expensive, if they are a destination Nordic skiing site with prolonged snow cover.

Ski trails should not traverse greens, tees, landing areas, or other sensitive areas of the course. Spring green-up is usually a few weeks late beneath groomed trails, and using roughs wherever possible is advised. Solid-tine aeration of turf under the trail system in early spring can help increase soil temperature and stimulate earlier growth. Groomed ski trails of compacted snow can create a physical barrier to rodent movement beneath the snow pack and help prevent meadow voles and other undesirable animals from migrating from native

habitat onto the maintained turf and causing damage. A well-placed trail system may therefore be beneficial by reducing turf damage from feeding animals. Also, snow mold rarely forms under the groomed trails.

Groomed trails also may create a barrier to surface drainage, so be aware of the possibility of impounding water and subjecting underlying turf to freeze injury. Again, careful route selection can minimize the potential for this type of injury. Once snow begins to melt, trenches may need to be cut across the trails to allow for drainage.

Grooming can start when an appropriate amount of snow has accumulated, usually a minimum of 6 to 12 inches. Before grooming, packing the trails with a rubber-tired skid steer or similar unit can be beneficial. Slush is not recommended for grooming, and if



Snow machines with tow-behind grooming attachments are an affordable and efficient method of grooming Nordic ski trails on golf courses.



Sophisticated trail grooming units are employed on golf courses at destination Nordic skiing sites like Sun Valley, Idaho.

insufficient snow cover exists, direct injury to the turf could result. Most facilities that are serious about skiing and striving to provide the best conditions will groom several days per week, if not daily.

Cart paths may not be the best location for ski trails if the paths need to be cleared in the spring for access to the greens and tees for snow removal. Asphalt and concrete also will not hold the snow as well, and melting or breakup of the snow pack is more likely.

Golfers need to be aware that grooming ski trails will likely result in reduced visual quality for a few weeks in the spring, as the turf under the trails will take extra time to recover. If the trails are properly located (out of play), the impact will be minimal and short lived. If skiing is allowed at your golf course, formulate a good plan for

traffic management and safeguard the most sensitive playing surfaces. Investing in some type of grooming equipment is advised to provide the best skiing and to control traffic.

Nordic skiing is a popular sport that provides some revenue in the form of trail passes to golf facilities that provide public access and offer concessions. This winter alternative could prove to be a viable use of a golf facility, enabling both golfers and staff to get a little winter exercise. And unlike most golfers, just about anyone can get around 18 holes in less than four hours on skis.

As senior agronomist in the USGA Green Section's Northwest Region, MATT NELSON enjoys the spectacular turf uniformity observed when two feet of snow is present.



Groomed ski trails may delay spring green-up of turf by a few weeks, thus proper location to minimize interference with play and presentation is critical.