

Nothing Comes For Free

Any maintenance practice that provides long-term improvement will require money and short-term acceptance of reduced playability, inconvenience, or both.

BY DARIN S. BEVARD

It is amazing how the rumor mill suggests that some other golf course has made some great improvement with no real cost or inconvenience to the golfers: Fairways were converted to creeping bentgrass in one season with no reduction in playability; greens were never closed during the winter and everything is still perfect; they overseeded their fairways and never had a problem with early summer transition! What do all of these claims have in common? Not unlike the legend of Big Foot or the Loch Ness monster, with a little investigation, these myths can usually be explained. In most instances, a misunderstanding of facts at the *other* golf course coupled with a desire for improvement at *our* golf course leads to a false hope of what can be accomplished for nothing.

Any time a significant change is made in a turf playing surface or additional stress is placed on the grass, there are consequences and costs. Sometimes the tradeoff is financial. There may be an increased cost in fertilizer or pesticides to overcome additional stress placed on the turf. Other times the cost is in reduced playability, inconvenience for golfers, or other intangible factors that cannot always be quantified.

Let's look at bermudagrass overseeding as an example. When bermudagrass fairways are overseeded during the early fall in the Mid-Atlantic Region, the bermudagrass is ripped to shreds and the fairways are overseeded with perennial ryegrass. For the next 2 to 3 weeks after overseeding, irrigation is applied regularly to the point of satu-

ration and carts are restricted to paths. Playability is greatly reduced and most golfers consider the cart restrictions a major inconvenience. In the early summer, the previously applied perennial ryegrass declines and the underlying bermudagrass begins to take over. Generally, there is a period of time during this transition when the fairways have thin and bare spots after ryegrass declines and bermudagrass has not completely filled in the voids, but the playability of the fairways in April and May is often superior to non-overseeded surfaces. A golfer who usually plays on non-overseeded fairways during the spring is wowed by the appearance and playability of overseeded fairways in the spring, but this person never had the chance to see the reduction in playability and inconvenience of cart restrictions during overseeding and transition. The first question: Why don't we do this at our course? The answer: Because there are costs that often remain unseen if you do not have all of the facts.

When looking to make any agronomic improvement, all costs must be considered, including the advantages provided with a given practice. Can bermudagrass overseeding increase spring rounds or outings to justify the inconvenience and cost? If the answer is yes, then the negatives associated with overseeding may be tolerable. Will long-term reliability and playability of fairways be improved through conversion to a different grass? If yes, then perhaps the cost of aggressive interseeding and the reduction in fall playability are worthwhile, but there will

be financial costs and a reduction in playability during each fall for each fall inter-seeding procedure. Nothing is free.

And the course that converted to creeping bentgrass in the fall? Their fairways had been devastated by gray leaf spot disease the previous summer, creating an excellent opportunity to establish bentgrass without competition from the ryegrass that was killed by the disease, but playability was poor for two months. The club that never restricted winter play? The superintendent made the decision of whether or not to close the course on a daily basis. The golfer simply played on a day that the course was declared suitable for play. The overseeded bermudagrass fairways with no transition problems? The golfer who raised the question played the course in early June, before transition problems were evident. Reasonable explanations accompanied each of these happenings.

Every golf course is looking for the Holy Grail: Improvement without cost. Do not get sucked in. Virtually everything involving improvement comes with some cost, financial or otherwise. Keep in mind that if controversial agronomic practices or course improvements had no cost or downside associated with them, they would not be controversial. Everyone would be happy. We know that this is not the case!

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