



Mowing patterns can be used to highlight terrain features and accent the landscape. There is a cost involved with the use of smaller lightweight mowing equipment to create this “WOW” factor.

## Form vs. Function

The “WOW” factor can be costly.

BY KEITH HAPP

**T**he USGA Green Section has always operated under the premise that the Committee should define maintenance standards for the course. These standards define the preparation of the golf course for daily play. With the standards put forth by the Committee, the task at hand calls for allocating the necessary level of funding to achieve the desired outcome. Sounds simple, right? All too often, the ends do not meet.

You may have heard of the “WOW” factor as it pertains to golf course conditioning. The “WOW” factor presents an eye-opening and even jaw-dropping first impression of the golf course to be played. The “WOW” factor is a function of the mowing lines and patterns used to create striking contrast between various features of the course. When viewed from the tee, mowing patterns highlight the landing area of a fairway, help

accentuate bunker features or mounds, and showcase the rough. Areas mowed perpendicularly to play can give the impression that they are narrower than they really are, while longer flowing mow lines may give the golfer the impression that an area is wider. The resulting appearance of the final product can vary, but the function of the mowing strategy is consistent and focused; prepare the area for play of the game of golf.



Time is money. Using longer angles and minimizing the number of turns made maximizes the time spent mowing and reduces the time needed for turning. Work management studies have documented that as much as 67% less time is needed to mow a fairway when clippings are returned rather than collected.

Preparing the course in the desired fashion has become increasingly more difficult due to the recent trends in the economy. Operating budgets are being scrutinized, all line items are being reevaluated, and budgets are being cut. The largest line item of most (if not all) golf course maintenance budgets is labor and related costs. The average cost for all labor is often 50% to 60% or more of the total golf course maintenance budget. During trying financial times, this line item is often reduced without consideration to the effect on conditioning. Expectations seldom change, despite the fact that there are fewer resources available to complete the required tasks. Work still needs to be completed to satisfy the golfers, and

the superintendent is charged with getting it done.

Creating the “WOW” factor comes with a cost. It requires labor hours to complete mowing practices and it takes more time when smaller mowers are used to create the mowing patterns. If that is what the golfers want, and they are adequately funding operations, then by all means, don’t change a thing. However, when budget reductions are mandated, course setup priorities must be reevaluated. The question must be asked: What is more important — playability or aesthetics? Surveys of golfers have provided evidence that playability and conditioning are the priorities. *Golf Digest’s* new definition of conditions for their raters is an

example. Raters now evaluate how firm, fast, and rolling the fairways are, and how firm, yet receptive, the putting surfaces are. There is no request for an evaluation of how the course looked. The focus is on playability.

It is estimated that 50% of the annual fuel cost for golf course maintenance is for mowing fairways, approaches, and tees! It makes sense to reduce the amount of time it takes to mow these areas. Although it is agronomically prudent to use smaller equipment on, and closer to, the putting surfaces, larger lightweight 5- or 7-plex machinery can be used effectively to prepare fairway turf when terrain features are not severe. Naturally, controlling mechanical stress (wear) is critical to

turf performance. On greens and approaches it makes sense to use smaller mowers. Clipping removal is more essential to playing quality in these areas of the course. In the more expansive areas of the course — fairways — additional adjustments can be made.

Superintendents are altering their mowing patterns to reduce the amount of turning required to complete their design. Some are returning to the technique of mowing the fairway surface in halves. For example, after mowing is completed, the view from the tee would present one side of the fairway as darker than the other. Time studies have been conducted, analyzing the various angles used to mow fairways. These studies provide evidence that, when turning is minimized, mowing can be completed in much less time. An added side benefit is the reduction in wear and tear on the adjacent rough.

Mowing without baskets is also an option to consider. Time studies have shown that mowing without baskets requires 67% less time to complete compared to the same area mowed with baskets. When labor cost and fuel cost are factored in, the overall impact on time management is significant. As

the saying goes, time is money. Productivity with allocated funds can be maximized, and course conditioning can be sustained.

Many turf managers are concerned about the effects of clipping debris on playing quality. There are ways to deal with this issue. Creative drag and blower devices have been fabricated and attached to mowers to disperse clipping debris. Turf tips about drag and blower use presented by the Green Section are available on the USGA website. Returning the clippings to these areas of the course recycles nutrients. Depending upon grass species, 100 to 150 lbs. of nitrogen (N) per acre per year is removed when clippings are harvested. Research has suggested that 50% of applied N is removed when clippings are harvested. Returning clippings may allow fertility inputs to be reduced, thus offering another element of savings. Also, research has found that clippings do not contribute to thatch accumulation problems.

Committees can participate in the process of conditioning the course. A simple strategy is to request that mowing equipment have the right of way to complete mowing tasks with minimal interruptions. Reducing idling

time creates a saving over the long term, and mowing in the afternoon minimizes the potential for unsightly clipping debris.

Golf courses are not created equal. Funding levels vary for maintenance programs used to accomplish course maintenance standards requested by golfers. Although the forms of the courses and maintenance programs vary, the function of the courses does not. The game is played the same, regardless of the venue and its presentation. Conditioning expectations can be achieved even if the “WOW” factor cannot be presented as desired. Reducing efforts to produce the “WOW” factor may allow for the use of maintenance practices that beneficially affect the play of the game during tight economic times.

*KEITH HAPP is an agronomist in the Mid-Atlantic Region, visiting courses in the states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. Keith is a graduate of The Ohio State University and has a sub-regional office located in the Pittsburgh, Pa., area, bringing him closer to courses in the western portion of the Mid-Atlantic Region.*



A simple cost-saving strategy is to request that mowers have the right of way to finish their work. This action saves time and money over the long term.