Mowing was frequently performed under saturated conditions, even though the potential for damage was high. Eventually, the work just needs to be completed.

We Need A Rain Check!

For golf course superintendents, excessive rainfall can provide challenges that are often unseen and unappreciated by golfers.

BY DARIN BEVARD

The 2009 growing season was a wet one for much of the Mid-Atlantic Region and beyond. It seems that every time a wet growing season occurs, superintendents hear a similar refrain from the uninitiated: "It has probably been an easy summer with all the rain!" Grass in home lawns and even golf course rough benefited from frequent summer rainfall, but fine turf that needs to be prepared daily to provide an acceptable playing surface did not thrive in many cases. Hot and wet conditions, disease, algae, and other problems greatly affected the health of grass, but that was only part of the challenge. Even when temperatures did not promote environmental stress, rain days restricted maintenance that needed to be completed, and course conditions suffered. There is a domino effect for the maintenance, appearance, and playability of a golf course when rain alters maintenance activities. Golfers may be more tolerant of golf course conditions during extended periods of wet weather if they understand the challenges they provide.

MAINTENANCE SCHEDULES

Maintenance schedules were immediately impacted by rainfall, including mowing frequency, green speed, fairway quality, etc. Normally, the more often these turfgrass areas are mowed, the better their overall quality. Superintendents were often forced to mow under conditions that they knew would likely damage the turf.

When hours and days of course maintenance time are lost, they cannot be recaptured, but the work that is required to meet golfer expectations does not change. There is just less time to complete it. Repairing the golf course required overtime and unplanned expenses that stretched budgets. Early season rainfall complicated the training of new employees because of constantly changing maintenance schedules.

Rough mowing is a perfect example. Frequent rainfall kept rough grasses lush and actively growing. The increased growth rate made playing from the rough more difficult and led to golfer complaints. Under saturated conditions,

rough could not be mowed without rutting. Rough that was extremely tall, lush, and difficult to play from generated angry requests from golfers to lower the height of cut when the grass could not be mowed down to the existing height in the first place! When the grass was finally cut, excessive clipping yields required blowing or other methods of dispersion to prevent clipping accumulations from degrading the appearance of the golf course or damaging underlying grass. One can see how easily course maintenance programs can fall behind. This general scenario played out in one way or another for many maintenance practices on golf courses.

GREEN SPEED

Green speed was a major topic of conversation for much of the growing season, especially in late spring and early summer. Maintenance intensity on greens was much lower than normal during much of May and early June because of rainfall. Greens were considered "slow" at the very time that golfers in the Mid-Atlantic Region expected them to be at their best! Wet weather creates several challenges for putting green preparation that directly impact green speed.

Persistent wet weather keeps putting greens soft, but being wet does not mean that a green must be slow. What it does mean is that golf course superintendents must be conservative with putting green maintenance to prevent scalping and other mechanical damage from occurring. Mowing heights may even need to be increased if greens are not mowed for two or three days. Superintendents are reluctant to implement aggressive mowing, rolling, and grooming practices to promote ball roll on wet, soft greens in late spring because of potential mechanical injury that can predispose greens to other physiological problems when summer stress hits.

The lack of daily maintenance on greens restricts green speed, and this effect is cumulative. That is, the maintenance practices performed on a given day build on the maintenance prac-

Rain often forced mowing to be skipped for one or more days. When mowing finally resumed, scalping was a major problem as efforts were made to groom putting greens for daily play.

tices performed on the day before. Gains in speed are made in increments of several inches per day until the desired green speed is achieved and can be maintained. When rain limits or completely washes out this daily maintenance, green speed suffers. Given that natural rainfall seems to increase turf growth rates, the impact on green speed is compounded.

BUNKER MAINTENANCE

This year, bunker playability was discussed during visits at a much greater frequency than usual. Never mind that bunkers are hazards. Right or wrong, there is an expectation for a certain level of conditioning in bunkers, and meeting these expectations is very difficult with heavy rainfall. Golfers are not used to firm, wet sand. Wet bunker conditions lead to complaints, but this is only a small part of the impact of heavy rain on bunker playability.

Severe bunker washouts occurred all too often this year. These washouts led to sand contamination, reduced playability, and a drain on already thin labor resources at many golf courses.

Bunker flooding was a repeated problem during the 2009 growing season. The time required to remove silt accumulations or pump water from bunkers was time not spent performing other maintenance practices on the golf course.

In many instances, heavy rain leads to severe washouts or even outright flooding of bunkers. Repairing bunkers takes many man-hours that could be used elsewhere. Some courses require 300 to 400 man-hours to repair bunkers after rain! Just the hours required to repair bunkers alters course maintenance. When bunkers are repaired after heavy rain and they begin to dry out, they are often considered too soft. After all, it takes time for the sand to settle, which again leads to complaints. This may seem directly contrary to the statements made above regarding wet bunkers and playability, but therein lies the problem with bunker playability. Additional man-hours are then spent trying to "fix" the playability of bunkers.

Washouts lead to sand contamination with soil and rocks when sand washes from bunker faces, further impacting the long-term appearance and playability of bunkers. Repeated contamination of bunkers compromises drainage, and when this occurs, water must be pumped from bunkers after heavy rainfall, which complicates bunker repairs. Heavy rain and bunkers do not mix!

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Detail suffers when maintenance schedules are altered by rainfall. Lost maintenance time during rain events cannot be made up, and the impacts of rainfall dictate that maintenance resources be allocated to other areas, including the many hours of bunker repair mentioned above. Mowing quality is poor under saturated conditions. Cut quality is often uneven, as attempts are made to remove two or three days of new growth after mowing has been skipped for several days. The result is lack of definition between turfgrass areas and a shabby appearance for the golf course. It might be perceived as indifference when all of the factors that led to this lack of definition and shabby appearance are not considered.

GOLF SCHEDULE

Do not forget the impact that rainfall can have on the golf schedule and ultimately the bottom

Lost mowing days in conjunction with aggressive growth of rough grasses not only led to excessive clippings and complaints from golfers, but also required extra resources for clipping dispersal.

line. Rounds of golf that are lost to rain, or even the threat of rain, cannot be recaptured. Golfers often receive rain checks when only partial rounds are completed, which means they will be playing for free or at a reduced cost when they return for their next round. This does not even consider impacts on food and beverage sales, which, again, cannot be made up. Superintendents are often caught between protection of the golf course and the bottom line when deciding whether or not a large outing or event should proceed under wet conditions. The effect of frequent rain events on daily-fee golf courses is obvious, but the revenue of private clubs is affected as well.

Explaining the challenges that are produced by frequent, heavy rain may seem simplistic, but the fact that there are so many comments regarding wet summers in the Mid-Atlantic Region being "easy" indicates there is a need for education on this topic. Too often there is a perception that when the sidewalk is dry, the golf course should be ready to go. This just is not the case.

Although no one wishes for a drought, the excessive rainfall experienced in many areas wreaked havoc on overall maintenance programs. There are certainly benefits to rainfall, but too much creates more problems than too little rain when it comes to golf course maintenance and golfer expectations. Rain may chase golfers from the course, but they can get a rain check. The needs of the grass are constant. Your golf course maintenance staff could use a rain check. But wait, there are no rain checks for golf course maintenance! Perhaps there should be.

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