

Is The Weather Really That Big of a Deal?

Mid-Atlantic courses are in great shape this year, but the weather may be getting too much credit.

BY ELLIOTT DOWLING



Mild summer weather allows superintendents to be more aggressive with surface-management procedures like topdressing, grooming, brushing, etc. Each practice promotes improved playing surfaces and ultimately better playing conditions.

Golf courses throughout the Mid-Atlantic Region are enjoying very good turf conditions this season. Most courses are doing so with the same management staff and seasonal team as last season. So why is it that last year, during an extremely hot and wet July, the less-than-perfect turf had to have resulted from mismanagement? Conversely, why are this

season's exceptional playing conditions the result of the weather and not an exceptional golf course management team?

It is hard to say how many visits I have conducted this season where the unusually cool temperatures, in conjunction with timely rain events, are receiving the majority of the accolades for golf course conditions. One or two

of these discussions didn't seem like a big deal, but the trend grew. I soon realized that most golfers are missing the big picture. The weather always plays a huge part in how golf courses are conditioned. Some days, rain might prevent the turf from being cut. Other days, hot and dry conditions may mean carts are not allowed on the course. Sometimes the weather is so

uncooperative that the name of the game is survival, so playability must take a back seat to keeping grass alive. Every once in a while the weather cooperates and allows superintendents to achieve ideal course conditions. There is no denying the importance of weather as it relates to course conditioning, and the ramifications of weather trends and events may not be readily apparent to most golfers. How many times have you heard, "We've had a lot of rain, so the course must be great, right?"

Unfortunately, some golfers think superintendents use weather as an excuse or crutch for poor conditions. While turf suffered last July as a result of hot or hot and wet conditions, no one wanted to hear that the weather was to blame. Now, golfers want to talk about the weather and its important role in course conditioning. Why is it that great playing conditions are a result of weather rather than the result of a knowledgeable and skilled superintendent and maintenance staff? The common golfer perception is that the management team is "working harder" than last year. However, simply put, the mild summer of 2014 allowed for more aggressive surface management techniques on fine turf areas. The result was improved playing conditions.

Last year, when many superintendents deserved praise for keeping grass alive, some were blamed for poor playing conditions. Water persisting in low areas causing subsequent turf declined due to wet wilt or sun scald was the norm last year, and greens were kept slower than desired in an effort to preserve turf health. The weather that triggered less-than-ideal conditions last year was commonplace throughout the Mid-Atlantic Region and out of the superintendent's control.

I would argue that last year, when the weather was terrible, superintendents and their staff were at their best. Maintaining a golf course under very demanding times shows how good a superintendent is. Sometimes, just getting a course ready for play is an achievement. The fact that many courses had playable conditions last summer is a testament to the work ethic and knowledge of golf course superintendents. The primary focus last summer, as opposed to this summer, was keeping grass alive.

This year, while superintendents should be praised for enhancing playability, the weather is receiving the accolades. This occurs far too often in this business. In one circumstance, the weather is an excuse for poor conditions. In another, it is the reason for good playing conditions. I think we are misinterpreting the importance of weather.

Let's examine why courses are in such good condition this season, despite the weather. This season's mild, predictable weather has allowed superintendents to focus efforts on enhancing playability as opposed to focusing efforts on keeping turf alive — i.e., superintendents can mow and roll more often if necessary. Furthermore, the less-stressful weather allows superintendents to topdress more often, and at higher rates, and conduct more aggressive surface-management procedures like vertical mowing, venting, or increased aeration. These management procedures can drastically improve turf health and playing conditions when cooperative weather allows them to occur.

The most common complaint during periods of stressful weather is that greens are too slow and too soft. This is a result of superintendents adopting

conservative maintenance techniques, or "pumping the brakes," to ensure plant health is not compromised. Conversely, this summer's weather allowed superintendents to keep their foot on the gas. Cooler weather in conjunction with timely rain events allowed turf managers to maintain dryer surfaces this year. This season, there was little fear of losing control of soil moisture. Dry surfaces result in healthier turf and better playability. In other words, more aggressive management leads to better playing surfaces, but some years Mother Nature does not allow aggressive management techniques.

Think of a simple math equation to relate weather, staff, and budget to course conditions. Good weather + good staff + adequate budget = good course conditions. Now change the weather to great or poor, the sum will increase or decrease proportionately. Assuming staff and budget remain the same, great weather will increase the sum. Conversely, poor weather will decrease the sum.

Next time the weather is not ideal, remember the effect weather has, in conjunction with staff and budget, on conditioning playing surfaces. Weather plays a critical role in course conditioning and may force superintendents to focus more on turf survival than on producing top-notch playability. Mother Nature always has the last word in turfgrass management. Sometimes Mother Nature allows us to produce great playability; sometimes Mother Nature barely allows us to keep the grass alive. Your golf course maintenance team is consistent, even when the weather is not.

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