

Practice Tees That Please

Practice tees require a unique management program because of heavy divoting and use throughout the season.

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Even with intensive management, small, heavily used practice tees require periodic closure for recovery.

In many ways, the practice facility at a golf course is like the shooting gallery at a carnival. There are far more misses than makes, people rarely hit the bullseye, and the prize of a well-struck shot usually leads to the desire to hit another one. The intensive use that most practice tees receive can make them one of the most challenging areas to maintain on a golf course. Superintendents are always on the lookout for strategies that can help a

practice tee perform better through the constant wear and tear.

While this article will focus on management practices to improve turf quality on the practice tee, the design and amount of usable hitting area have a bigger impact on turf conditions than anything else. Even the best management programs cannot compensate for insufficient size. Several excellent articles have been written on how large practice tees should be and how

they should be built, including the USGA articles [“Tailor-Made,”](#) [“Building a New Driving Range Tee? Super-Size It,”](#) and [“How Does Your Practice Facility Stack Up?”](#) Unfortunately, many golf facilities do not have the space or resources to build a practice tee that is large enough to fully meet their needs. In these cases, the management program becomes even more critical.

In order to maintain the best turf possible, heavily used driving range



It is important to level the heavy topdressing applications used to repair divots in order to maintain a level practice tee.



Planting seed with modern slice-seeders can increase turf density and hasten practice tee recovery without causing excessive injury to existing turf.

tees require intensive management. This translates to more labor hours and more money for seed, fertilizer, plant protectants, and other inputs. Fortunately, given the popularity of practice tees, golf facilities are increasingly willing to invest in the inputs required for successful practice tee management.

START WITH THE APPROPRIATE GRASS SPECIES

Various grass species can be used on practice tees successfully. New grasses and new techniques for using them are constantly evolving. Selecting the grass or grasses that are best adapted to your climate and usage level is essential for top performance. Rapid establishment, wear tolerance, and recovery rates are the most important attributes for turf on a practice tee. The species' ability to produce sufficient thatch should also be considered. Practice tees are unlikely to develop thatch problems because they are so heavily used, and having some thatch is necessary for cushioning, resiliency, and soil stability in this high-use environment. Factors like tee size, usage level, and available resources should be considered as well. Unlike most areas of the golf course, turf on practice tees should be considered an "annual crop" that is essentially harvested and replanted multiple times each year.

DESTRUCTION AND RECOVERY ARE A NEVER-ENDING BATTLE

Practice tee management programs and recovery techniques vary widely. Divot mix composition, filling technique, and repair frequency all vary due to factors such as climate, grass species, and available resources.

Divot filling is an essential maintenance practice on heavily used practice tees, and the first key step is selecting an appropriate divot mix material. When selecting the divot mix material, carefully consider the characteristics of the soils used to build the tee to avoid creating potentially harmful layering problems. It is best to choose a material that has

drainage characteristics similar to the material used to build the tee. If the divot mix holds significantly more moisture than the construction material, excessive moisture may be held at the surface, generating drainage and disease problems.

Using pure sand to fill divots works well and is economical for tees planted with warm-season species where recovery is vegetative and seed germination is unnecessary. It often makes sense to mix soil or organic matter with sand to increase moisture retention where recovery from seed is required. Divots in practice tees comprised of overseeded bermudagrass or cool-season grasses are commonly filled with a sand and soil or sand and organic matter mix to increase moisture retention and promote seed germination.

Spot-filling of individual divots is rarely practical due to the volume of divots on most practice tees. More frequently, heavy applications of sand or divot mix are made to damaged areas and drag mats or landscape rakes are used to spread the material and level and fill the divots.

There are options for applying seed when it is necessary for divot recovery. The most common practice is to mix seed with the divot mix prior to application. Alternatively, seed can be broadcast applied or slit-seeded into the tee surface prior to a topdressing application. Some superintendents have also had success aerating with small-diameter solid tines at a shallow depth prior to broadcast seeding. This can help create a good seed bed without causing unacceptable damage to existing turf. Slit-seeding success

depends on using more modern slit-seeders that are less damaging to existing turf. Older models are effective in achieving good seed-to-soil contact but can thin existing turf. Given the wear that practice tees receive, seeding is best accomplished with as little damage to existing turf as possible. Where feasible, priming or pre-germinating seed provides notable advantages. Primed seed germinates more quickly than untreated seed once it is planted and irrigated. However, priming requires additional time and labor, which makes it a less common practice. Divots filled with pre-germinated seed require less water to promote germination, and drier turf is much less susceptible to mechanical injury and disease. Pre-germinating also speeds divot recovery by a few days, which can be a significant benefit over the



Practice tees provide a perfect environment for introducing new golfers to the game.



Shifting usage patterns with ropes and dividers helps ensure wear is spread evenly so that the entire practice tee is used as efficiently as possible.

course of an entire season. Perennial ryegrass can be pre-germinated easily by mixing seed with the divot mix and keeping it moist and aerated for two or three days. Pre-germinating creeping bentgrass seed requires more time and is more difficult.

WATER MANAGEMENT

Water management can be challenging on practice tees since the turf is in varying stages of health and maturity for most of the season. Mature turf requires less frequent irrigation, whereas new seedlings require light and frequent irrigation. Watering areas of a practice tee differently is difficult and potentially labor intensive. Overwatering healthy, mature turf wastes water, adversely affects turf health, and increases wear injury. Conversely, insufficient irrigation can result in the death of new seedlings. Spot watering newly seeded areas in the morning and once or twice during the day is ideal. Some courses have installed irrigation systems that allow damaged areas to be irrigated independently of healthy turf. If precise irrigation of

recovering areas is not practical, the irrigation system must be used to irrigate larger areas, which may lead to some overwatering.

NITROGEN FERTILITY

Heavily used practice tees should be the most heavily fertilized area at most golf facilities. The goal should be to promote enough growth and recovery to keep pace with wear, so heavily used practice tees require considerably more nitrogen fertilization than regular tees.

There often are concerns regarding increased disease pressure when cool-season turf receives high levels of nitrogen fertilizer. While the concern is valid, under-fertilized or moderately fertilized cool-season turf on a practice tee may not be around long enough to succumb to disease. “You have to have grass to have disease,” is an adage worth considering as nitrogen fertility rates are determined for a practice tee. Annual nitrogen inputs on practice tees may need to be 50 to 200 percent higher than what is applied to tees on the golf course because of the

extreme difference in wear. Additionally, plant protectants will likely be required to control diseases in many locations based on turf types and climate.

WEED CONTROL

The best defense against weed invasion is to maintain a healthy, dense stand of turf, but this is not possible on practice tees. Weeds can be difficult to control due to constant divoting and the need to continually reseed. Preemergent herbicides can be used, but they can impact seedling establishment and survival. Furthermore, heavy divoting can break through the herbicide barrier, thereby reducing efficacy. Pre- and post-emergent herbicides must be carefully selected and applied to avoid injuring seedlings. In areas of heavy weed pressure, both pre- and post-emergent herbicides may be necessary to achieve acceptable control.

PLANT GROWTH REGULATORS

Plant growth regulators (PGRs) are occasionally used on practice tees.

Class A PGRs are the most commonly used products since they alter growth but do not slow recovery. Class A PGRs also cause little or no injury to seedlings. Class B PGRs provide many benefits, but they could slow growth and recovery to a point where their use may be counterproductive.

CULTIVATION

Performing core aeration on a practice tee one to three times annually is helpful for several reasons. It can promote recovery and create a good seedbed. It is also extremely helpful for leveling and combatting layering. Practice tees often become unlevel due to heavy divot filling, and layering is common. Although primarily used on bermuda-grass tees, fraze mowing also can be

used to level cool-season grass tees and remove thatch and layering prior to replanting.

MANAGING PRACTICE TEE USAGE

The most common method of identifying and moving the hitting areas on a practice tee is with a rope or by placing wooden or plastic dividers on the ground. While some golf courses still utilize two ropes spaced several yards apart and attached to the ground with small stakes, this is not advised for two reasons. First, there have been multiple cases of injury when this rope is struck by a player's club. Second, a forward rope is not needed when wear progresses from the front of the tee to the rear. Worn turf in front of golfers

will discourage them from moving forward of the desired area.

Play must also be shifted laterally within the defined hitting area, particularly when dividers are used. For example, ropes can be shifted on day one and the dividers shifted on day two, with the process repeating continually. Dividers to separate hitting stations can be purchased or made from wood or composite materials. It is important to remember that dividers left in place for more than a couple of days can smother turf and cause unsightly damage. Regardless of the precise techniques used, the goal should be to manage golfer movement in a way that creates relatively uniform wear within the defined area before moving on to the next area.



Artificial surfaces are needed at most facilities to prevent extreme damage following inclement weather and during periods of slow turf growth.



Adequate moisture retention in the divot mix is important for promoting rapid germination of seed.

Another simple and effective way to reduce wear on practice tees is to modify the amount of golf balls positioned at the practice area. Unlimited balls on the actual practice tee leads to far heavier usage. A system where golfers are provided smaller buckets or bags of balls from a station near the tee can help keep usage at more manageable levels.

Systematic use rotation is critical, and many successful programs start with a measurement of tee depth and install permanent markers at the optimal spacing to provide guidance to the staff responsible for moving the ropes and dividers. For example, installing the markers to designate one week's worth of usage can help ensure that wear and the associated recovery are kept on a predetermined schedule.

At most golf courses, grass practice tees will need to be closed at various

times during the year to promote recovery or prevent excessive damage. Artificial turf can be used periodically during the season to provide regular respites for grass tees. Extensive use of artificial turf is common in the shoulder seasons or winter when recovery is slow or during extremely wet conditions when increased damage is likely. Installing an artificial surface at the back of the practice tee can allow continued usage of the practice range while the grass tee recovers. Various types of mats are discussed in the USGA article "[Welcomed Mats for Small Practice Tees](#)." In addition to permanent installations, some golf courses in milder climates have used moveable mats as part of the regular practice area. When moved daily, and when temperatures are not extreme, this technique has proven helpful on smaller tees.

GOLFERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Golfer habits and use patterns have an extraordinary impact on practice tee turf quality. Educating golfers about how to use a grass practice tee in the least disruptive manner possible can significantly reduce wear and tear. Fewer or smaller divots reduce recovery requirements. Reducing wear and implementing intensive maintenance are the key to maximizing turf quality on practice tees.

In the USGA article "[Practice Like A Pro](#)," various types of divot patterns are discussed. The linear style is strongly preferred as it results in the least amount of turf damage and promotes faster recovery. This [USGA infographic](#) illustrates the preferred divot pattern and some patterns to avoid.

CONCLUSION

Simply managing the practice tee with the same inputs used for the tees or fairways on the course will probably result in marginal conditions at best. The practice tee requires a unique management program because of heavy divoting and use throughout the season. Factors such as nitrogen fertilization, irrigation, and repairing divots become even more important as the tee size decreases. Without the fundamental programs described in this article, the practice experience will be less than perfect.

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