

The Fescue of Your Dreams

If you want it wispy...it must be crispy!

By Bob Vavrek

How would you describe the perfect natural rough? For many golfers, the romanticized version would be a sparse stand of golden brown fescue, about knee-high, crowned by slender seedheads that yield and ripple like ocean waves against the gentle breeze. Furthermore, when an errant shot finds this ideal rough, you find your ball without too much difficulty and with a little luck, have a decent chance of advancing the ball toward the green. Worst-case scenario is simply a wedge back to the short grass. Never lost, never in jail and never – well, hardly ever – is the ball unplayable. Alas, this perfect rough is quite the oxymoron if you think about it.

Just where would we find this fescue of our fantasy? The avid golfer would probably remember watching a wayward drive into deep rough at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club during U.S. Open television coverage or recollect images of sparse, golden roughs from

various venues in the United Kingdom during coverage of the British Open.



Fescue is a catch-all term often used to describe a group of grasses. There are many different types of fescues – sheep’s fescue, creeping red fescue, tall fescue, chewings fescue – to name just a few examples. The classic fine fescue rough that most golfers would

encounter is most likely composed of some combination of sheep’s, chewings and hard fescues.

There is no shortage of fine fescue roughs to be found at courses across the northern United States. In fact, it’s likely more of a challenge to find a course built during the past

20 years where the architect has *not* incorporated unmowed fine fescue into the design. So why are there 10 gnarly, weedy jungles of fescue for every rough of sparse, wispy grass?

The primary culprit is water, and to a lesser extent, fertilizer. Granted, ample moisture and nutrients are essential during establishment, but once the grass matures, the best way to maintain a relatively pure stand of sparse turf is to limit inputs of water and nutrients as much as possible. In contrast, the quickest way to transform thin fescue into an unplayable weed patch is to apply plenty of irrigation and nitrogen.

The strength of fine fescue is an ability to survive in dry, sandy, infertile soils a bit better than Kentucky bluegrass, bentgrass or most other cool-season grasses commonly used on a golf course. Fescue's weakness is its inability to compete with the aforementioned grasses or weeds when plenty of water and nutrients are available.

Far too often, fine fescue is planted in areas where it is doomed to failure. Low, chronically wet areas of the course, sites with heavy soils that hold abundant water and nutrients, and areas immediately adjacent to greens or fairways that are irrigated frequently are all places where fescue will probably fail.

Eliminating or adjusting sprinkler coverage to keep fescue dry is only part of the solution, since we cannot control the weather. Frequent rainfall during an unusually wet season can cause just as much harm to a fescue rough as uncontrolled irrigation. In addition, a wet spring can produce dense foliage that persists all season and a crop of extra-tall seedheads that are susceptible to being permanently blown down (lodging) in a strong wind.

We love our motorized carts in the United States, but carts and fescue are like oil and water...they just don't mix. Concentrated cart traffic will definitely affect the health and appearance of natural fescue roughs and can cause problems of equal magnitude on regularly mowed fescue fairways or roughs.

Make every effort to keep the roughs dry. Keep carts off the turf. Control weeds with a well-timed herbicide application when necessary. Prevent the accumulation of excess plant debris in natural roughs with an annual mowing operation, but be sure to remove the plant debris to prevent clumps of dead grass from smothering the turf. Follow these suggestions and you just might achieve the wispy fescue of your dreams. The roughs will look great from a distance and, with any luck, you won't have much opportunity to see them any closer with a club in your hand.

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