



TOO MUCH GOLF?

Neil Squires, STRI Regional Agronomist for the South East, writes about the importance of a maintenance programme.

Secretary At Work: August 2003 (reviewed August 2011)

Adequate stock of efficient and up-to-date machinery is essential to the maintenance programme.

It seems to me while visiting golf clubs over the last few years that many Course Managers are finding it increasingly difficult to fit in the amount of maintenance that is needed to keep a golf course in good playing condition. I know that other STRI agronomists have made similar observations around the country. Does this reflect a lack of knowledge or willingness to work by greenkeepers? The answer is definitely not, but what greenkeepers are apparently experiencing is reluctance by golfers to accept that maintenance is essential and acceptable. Any degree of disruption to play or playing surfaces results in a barrage of comment and complaint from members so that greenstaff can feel tempted to take the easy way, but this will lead to a decline in course condition. Already my clear impression is that the condition of some courses has not yet fully recovered from recent extreme wet winters because the aggressive remedial maintenance work necessary has not been carried out to properly relieve soil compaction and thatch problems.

In part, golf is a victim of its own success with courses busy with regular daily all-year-round golf, but there is also the aspect of the number of competitions nowadays, not just at weekends but also for ladies, veterans and members during the week. For many clubs there is now a regular stream of competitions so that room for maintenance is becoming increasingly difficult to find. Added to this, there are visiting societies and clubs that are reliant on income from these societies are reluctant to risk upsetting the visitors through any lack of course condition because there is increasing competition for visiting societies.

Thus, overall there is pressure from the golfers for the course to receive intensive use and to be presented in a high quality condition without any unwelcome degree of course disruption through maintenance operations. Clearly, there can be conflict between the golfers and greenstaff. The message needs to be impressed on golfers that intensive use of the course requires an equally intensive maintenance programme if the overall standards of the course are to be retained, not just in the short term but also for the long term.

So, what is to be done? Clubs need to establish an acceptable and workable balance between golf and maintenance. This may require attention to the following subjects:–

1. Support

Clubs should recognise the knowledge, expertise and experience of their Course Manager so that the Course Manager receives the support and protection to allow him and the greenstaff to carry out the necessary programme of course maintenance.

2. Education

Clubs should try to educate the golfers of the need for regular routine maintenance that may on occasion give rise to some short-term disruption to playing surfaces. Club officials should take steps, both formally and informally, to spread the word within the club regarding essential course maintenance. Possibly an open meeting could be held for the members involving the Course Manager and maybe the club's agronomist to explain more fully to members the ongoing need for intensive maintenance.

3. Level of play

The club may need to review the level of play, both the social and competitive, and define the importance of the various events in the golfing calendar. So that at least some of the events may be relegated to lesser importance and therefore able to accept some minor degree of surface disruption or other slight effect of maintenance.

4. Course Policy Document

Clubs should ensure that a good, appropriate Course Policy Document is in place that sets out the aims and parameters for course maintenance and presentation to meet current and future needs of the club. If there is an existing Course Policy Document then this should be updated regularly and if the club does not have a Course Policy Document then certainly the formulation of such a document should definitely be considered.

5. Maintenance Practices

The Course Manager and club together should review the current maintenance routines to ensure that timings and operations are sufficient and efficient and also that new techniques are embraced that may increase effectiveness of the work and minimise disruption. New techniques could include the use of needle and fluted tines for aeration, deep scarification to remove thatch, use of decompactor machines such as the Earthquaker.

6. Resources

The club should ensure that there are enough qualified greenstaff to enable the target maintenance programme to be achieved effectively within the time allocated. This will also mean that an adequate stock of efficient machinery will be essential along with the necessary materials.