"Sometimes We Just Need Handcuffs"

Nothing is sometimes the best thing to do.

BY DAVID A. OATIS

The title of this article is a favorite quote from a wise and very experienced superintendent. When turf is in trouble and the weather is extreme, the hardest thing for a golf course superintendent to do is nothing. Surprisingly, sometimes that may be the best thing to do.

The pressures of maintaining good turf and good playability sometimes push superintendents towards implementing solutions that may be unwise. Some solutions may have no basis in science and have minimal chances of success, some may be a waste of money, and others may just be too aggressive. The "kitchen sink" syndrome, trying everything imaginable to stop the decline of turf, is easy to fall into, and it is easy to understand why. The pressure to maintain good turf and good playability, and the desire to keep a job, can be excruciating!

There are a few problems with the kitchen-sink approach: it can be expensive and it can be impossible to determine what actually is responsible for the turf improvement. Worse yet, aggressive treatments can ruin playability and push more turf over the edge, causing further turf decline and loss.

What is the right approach? In some situations, the turf is so weak and the weather is so extreme that there is little that can be done to avoid turf loss. In extreme situations, just about anything that is done to the turf adds to the stress level. The 2005 and 2006 seasons in the Northeast Region were very difficult, and stress and physical injury (from mowing, rolling, traffic, etc. under high temperatures) seemed to kill as much turf as diseases did. Cutting too low for too long depletes the turf's energy reserves and weakens it to a point where nearly any disease, or possibly even traffic alone, can kill it. The keys in these situations are to minimize losses and avoid compounding mistakes.

There are times when it is important to show golfers that something is being done to protect the turf, and one of most common reactions is to get out the aerator and "punch some holes in the ground." If soils are anaerobic and the timing is right, cultivation can breathe new life into tired, declining turf. There are times when getting out the aerator can make the difference between life and death for turf, but keep in mind that cultivation causes turf injury and can disrupt putting surfaces. Aerators can kill turf if they are used improperly or at the wrong time. So, before you reach for the aerator or make the next application of fertilizer, pesticide, or growth regulator, evaluate the risk/reward benefit. Ask yourself what the outcomes of your actions might be. There are innumerable scenarios to consider, but here is a common one in the Northeast:

It is early to mid July and some putting green turf has already been lost. More turf seems to be fading, and there is a strong desire to get seed in the ground to promote recovery. Depending on where your course is geographically and what the problem and weather outlook are, punching small holes may be a good idea. However, aggressive cultivation (large hollow tines and/or deep verticutting, topdressing, dragging, etc.) may cause more injury and push borderline turf over the edge. Moreover, seed planted in early or mid July is not likely to have a high survival rate, particularly if the green is kept in play, and these disruptive processes can destroy putting quality for the rest of the season. Worse yet, the surface and thatch layer may be so weakened by these practices that it may be impossible to repeat them in a few weeks, when the timing is optimal for turf recovery, without causing extreme surface disruption.

This may be the hardest time of all for a golf course superintendent to do nothing, but it might just be the best time. Waiting a few weeks until early or mid August or until temperatures moderate and the disruptive procedures have a better chance of stimulating recovery could be the best move.

Golf course superintendents tend to be take-charge, can-do people who are accustomed to being faced with problems that require decisive action. It is ingrained in their very nature to identify problems and take action to solve them. However, patience is a virtue and acknowledging that the turf "looks bad but plays fine" for a short period of time can sometimes be the best approach. A wise person once said, "When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging." Another way of saying this is, "Sometimes we just need handcuffs."

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