



# Great Expectations

Managing the perils of golf course renovation: Perspectives from Green Section Agronomist Todd Lowe and Golf Course Superintendent Chris Carson.

# FACE-LIFT OR LETDOWN

Help golfers develop fair expectations for successful golf course renovations.

BY TODD LOWE

**G**olf course renovations are necessary from time to time. There are different reasons for renovating, such as the need for improving drainage, enlarging putting greens and tees, or regrassing putting surfaces with an improved turfgrass variety. Also, the play character of some areas of the golf course degrades over time through normal wear and requires routine touch-ups. For example, teeing surfaces develop a crowned appearance after years of divots/sand topdressing, and laser-leveling significantly improves golf course aesthetics and playability. Likewise, bunkers often become contaminated with silt or clay through weathering and are eventually refurbished with good quality sand and supplemental drainage. Oftentimes, a new irrigation system is installed and projects such as these are conducted while the course is closed. In any case, these projects are necessary from time to time to protect the club's most valuable asset . . . the golf course.

Golfer frustration can develop following a renovation, caused by concerns such as damage from improper construction or unanticipated costs in time or money. There are other complaints that arise following a renovation that, from an outsider's point of view, seem rather minor. Perhaps these are due to the extended course closure or high costs of renovation, which create unfair expectations of perfection upon course opening. Or perhaps the project was improperly marketed to garner support from the members. In any case, unfair expectations often develop, and this article lists some of the more common complaints as well as ways to inform golfers of exactly what to anticipate.

## COSMETIC SURGERY

Patients who undergo cosmetic surgery are bruised and swollen for several months following surgery. The improvements, although long-lasting, are seldom immediately noticeable. This same phenomenon is true following most golf course renovations. Bunker sand requires time to settle and become firm. As a result, bunkers often are soft, and fried-egg lies are a common complaint

for several months following renovation. Firmness is also an issue with putting greens. Unlike bunkers, however, putting greens usually are very firm during the first year or two following renovation. This can frustrate even the best golfers as the greens accept incoming shots poorly. It takes time to develop an appropriate "pad" of thatch and organic matter, and new putting greens remain firm until this occurs.

Surface irregularity is another common complaint of new putting greens immediately after renovation. This is especially troublesome on sprigged bermudagrass greens, as the stolons (runners) intermingle throughout the grow-in period and become dense. Turfgrass density improves as the grass acclimates to daily mowing; however, additional slicing, rolling, light verticutting, or sand topdressing are necessary to help smooth putting surfaces as they mature.

Newly renovated playing surfaces (greens, tees, fairways, and roughs) require time to mature and become dense. Thatch and organic matter are necessary for retaining water and nutrients, and having an adequate organic layer improves turfgrass recovery from stresses. Newly renovated areas often appear weaker or thinner than mature areas of the golf course until organic matter accumulates to appropriate levels.

There are also the unforeseen events that can occur during renovation. Heavy rainfall, which creates washouts on newly renovated areas and saturates the soil, delays construction as the areas must be recontoured when the soil dries. As a result, the golf course requires a longer maturation than if the weather had been ideal. Many golf courses reduce the likelihood of washouts by sodding tees, fairways, and roughs, especially on highly sloped areas. While the initial cost is high, sodding significantly reduces downtime caused by heavy rainfall. Having an experienced contractor is also very helpful when it comes to planning projects around the weather, as this is an issue they face regularly. Allowing a "cushion" of time for poor weather may be necessary, and it is important to express this up front to the golfers to minimize future complaints.

Another comparison that can be made between golf course renovation and cosmetic surgery is that renovations seldom create a completely different golf course. In the same manner that cosmetic surgery cannot make your wife look like Marilyn Monroe, renovation will not make your golf course look like Augusta National. Underneath the touch-ups, it is still the same golf course.



### COMMUNICATE!

Good communication is necessary for developing fair expectations and a successful

renovation. It is important to communicate the scope of the project as well as the amount of time necessary for construction and grow-in. As mentioned earlier, the renovated areas often require a season of maturation, and the con-

ditioning of these areas changes significantly throughout the first year. It is important to communicate the time needed for maturation and the conditions to expect during that time.

There are different means of communicating to golfers, and the most obvious is through the golf club newsletter or presentations to the membership. If a golf course architect is involved

with the renovation project, having the architect address the membership is an excellent means of communicating the scope and the time frame of construction and grow-in. It may be necessary to have several presentations prior to renovation and throughout various phases of the project, depending upon the size of the project, to keep members informed.

Scheduling a Turfgrass Advisory Service visit with a USGA agronomist is an excellent means of communicating with golfers. Agronomists visit many clubs throughout their region and can offer some insight into what to expect with the renovation and some important issues to consider.

The USGA is a non-biased agency, and agronomists can often save the club time and money by offering impartial advice based on scientific research and knowledge gained from other golf courses. At the very minimum, agronomists can educate golfers of the pitfalls of renovation so they can develop fair expectations.

Hosting renovation tours of small groups of golfers is one of the best means of keeping them abreast of the renovation progress. These tours are generally only an hour or two in length and should be kept to a small number so that every question is easily answered. It is best to host tours periodically throughout the renovation to allow a greater number of golfers to attend. This allows golfers to see the progress of the project firsthand and gain a better perspective of the improvements. It also is an excellent educational vehicle for the daily operation of the golf course, as the superintendent can better explain how the renovation will improve golf course maintenance.

The internet also is an excellent means for communicating various projects to golfers. Computers are common in most homes or libraries throughout the United States, and golfers can receive instantaneous updates of projects like golf course renovations. Websites are especially helpful for seasonal members who travel back home during summer months and do not have the opportunity to see the golf course. A picture is worth a thousand words, and Web sites can store numerous digital images of the construction and grow-in so that golfers can know exactly what to expect upon the reopening of the golf course.

### SUMMARY

Golf courses require an occasional “nip-and-tuck” from time to time to improve playability and aesthetics. Often these are not immediately noticeable but are improvements that will last for many years. The key to a successful renovation is to develop realistic expectations prior to the renovation and communicate them to the membership throughout the entire project. Contact your local USGA agronomist for some pre-surgery consultation before your next renovation.

*TODD LOWE is an agronomist in the USGA Green Section's Florida Region.*



Newly renovated putting greens lack an appropriate pad of thatch and organic matter. This results in greens that are very firm for the first one or two years. These soil profiles demonstrate the change in organic matter buildup over time.