

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

Turn Off The Faucet!

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MANY WOULD ARGUE that overwatering has ruined the American game of golf. This is not necessarily the fault of the golf course superintendent, since most golfers put a higher priority on green color than on optimum playing conditions. If there are a few dry spots on the golf course, you can be sure the superintendent is going to hear about it — and boy, is he going to hear about it!

Superintendents come under heavy pressure to produce greens that will hold a shot, and to ensure green conditions on the tees, fairways, and rough. This unfortunate demand must be followed if superintendents expect to keep their jobs. Overwatering starts a vicious cycle that begins with large ball marks, spike marks, and wheel rutting caused by golf carts and mowing equipment. This is followed by soil compaction, shallow rooting, algae, moss, weed encroachment, black layer, and disease development. The grass is in a constant state of stress and the only way to keep it alive is to syringe, water, and spray fungicides.

Irrigation practices influence how the game is played. Soft, overwatered conditions force the game to be played in the air. There is very little roll on the fairways or opportunities to play bump-and-run shots. Greens are now expected to be like dart boards — if you hit the target, it should stick.

A valuable, but short-lived, lesson was learned during the recent drought and water shortages in California. Several golf courses were forced to shut off the water for an extended period of time during the hot summer months, and could only hand-water greens. Some remarkable things happened. The lack of water caused the rapid demise of *Poa annua*, and the more drought-resistant turf varieties, such as bermudagrass and creeping bentgrass, persisted. Moisture-loving weeds disappeared, and people were amazed at how long the turf survived with little or no water. But after one year of above-normal rainfall, the greed for green was once again apparent.

What was actually learned as a result of water restrictions and drought? Apparently, not much. Drought will continue to be a



cyclical event in many parts of the country, especially in California, and it will be increasingly necessary to use water resources wisely and responsibly. Researchers and turfgrass breeders have developed grasses that use significantly less water, but green committees and superintendents have been reluctant to try these grasses on their golf courses. It seems nobody is willing to make a change unless they are forced to do so.

New equipment and technology will always rise to the occasion. Soil amendments, better fungicides, state-of-the-art irrigation systems, and sand-based greens are

tools to promote healthy and consistent turf growth; they are not a license to overwater. Green color can be maintained through careful fertilization and well-timed cultural practices, without excessive irrigation. The result will be a much more durable and vigorous turf than one that gets its color primarily from water. For the good of the grass and the good of the game, it is time we tolerated a few dry spots and put playing quality above green color. Take a careful look at your priorities and watering practices, and don't be afraid to turn off the faucet if you need to.