

# A Waste of Time

Save money with this tip to reduce mowing!

by PATRICK M. O'BRIEN

**G**OLF COURSES are always searching for ideas to save money and reduce the maintenance budget. With every phase of the budget under close scrutiny, many golf courses feel their budget is efficient and productive. However, golf courses in the South with an intermediate rough cut may not be operating at peak efficiency.

Most golfers' expectations of bermudagrass fairways and roughs are based on management practices of cool-season turfgrasses. At these northern golf courses, mower striping and the establishment of an intermediate rough cut is popular. Both practices are appealing to the golfer, though primarily from an aesthetic point of view. Typically, one-half to one inch height differentials exist between these mowed areas on cool-season turfgrasses. The intermediate rough or "step cut" is usually six feet wide next to the fairways. Each of the three mowed areas is readily visible from the tee.

Across the southern U.S., maintaining an intermediate step cut between the fairway and rough is also a routine management practice today. The step cut is usually mowed three to four times weekly at a one-inch height of cut and a width of 72 to 84 inches. This mowing height is selected since bermudagrass fairways are usually mowed between  $\frac{3}{8}$  and  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches and roughs at  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches. With these one-half-inch mowing height differences between the bermudagrass playing areas, the intermediate cut isn't visible to the golfer from the tee. The golf course superintendent achieves nothing by mowing the step cut on bermudagrass playing areas.

Why have golfers requested golf course superintendents to spend time mowing the intermediate roughs? The practice could have originated from USGA championship preparation practices for major golf events, such as the U.S. Open and U.S. Amateur. For these championships, rough heights of cut sometimes are maintained at four

to six inches, with Kentucky bluegrass the primary grass. The USGA feels a rough should inflict a half-shot penalty on an expert golfer. This means it should take a great recovery shot from the primary rough for the golfer to par the hole. A poor recovery shot from the rough will result in at least a bogey. It was felt that with the narrow fairway landing areas (26 to 32 yards) provided at these championships, some intermediate rough (two-yard width) around the entire border of the fairway would be more fair for golfers who stray just a few feet off the fairway turf.

In the South, bermudagrass is the most popular turfgrass for fairways and roughs. To see an intermediate rough, at least a one-inch height differential is needed between the adjacent mowed areas. Typically, bermudagrass roughs are mowed at  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches in the summer. In order for the golfers to see the step cut from the tee, the rough would have to be mowed at  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 inches. A bermudagrass rough at this height would be at least a full shot penalty for even an expert golfer, and maybe more for the bogey golfer!

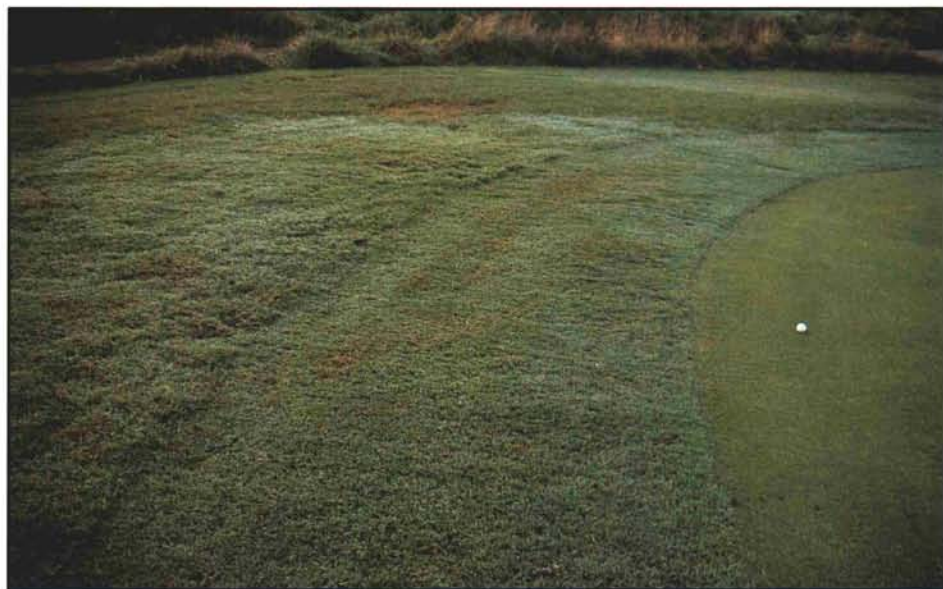
With a normal bermudagrass rough, the intermediate rough is invisible. The

step cut is invisible because no significant leaf color differences exist between any of the bermudagrass varieties when mowed at the usual heights. With the cool-season grasses, two turf species, creeping bentgrass and Kentucky bluegrass, usually are grown and have different leaf colors and textures in the various mowed areas. The step cut is easily seen with normal mowing heights with cool-season turfs. Nothing is achieved with this maintenance practice for the typical golf course across the South. To save money, personnel, gasoline, and equipment, forget the intermediate rough with bermudagrasses.

So if you are a golfer on a bermudagrass golf course, don't mandate the intermediate rough height. Errant tee shots that stray into the rough will be penalized more severely at these courses with routinely cut warm-season turfgrasses. An intermediate rough cut does nothing to enhance the golf course.

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The intermediate cut is more visible at this mowing height, but the bermudagrass rough is too tall for regular play.