



*Every golf course has a threshold level of play. When this threshold is exceeded, conditioning and maintenance fall off and costs go up. Identify the correct level of play volume for your golf course and protect that line.*

# HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

*Every course has a level of play that, when passed, results in conditioning/maintenance falling off and costs going up.*

by **BOB BRAME**

**P**LAY VOLUME has become a major issue at golf courses throughout the country. Although it is important to receive enough play to cover expenses and return a reasonable profit, excessive volume will compromise playability in the short-term and course value over the long haul. Balancing agronomic health with income can be difficult and subjective. Although agronomics, economics, and politics are each a part of every maintenance decision, it is solid agronomics that ultimately guarantees long-term conditioning/value. The following discussion outlines several possible indicators that your course may be getting too much play.

## **Difficult to Apply Pesticides When Needed**

In an effort to avoid play, it is very common for courses to hold/block one day (or at least a morning) each week for pesticide and/or fertilizer applications. However, what happens when play volume begins crunching in on the dedicated window (e.g. allowing Monday morning outings, when the course is officially closed)? This can force very early morning, evening, or

nighttime applications, or the concession that play and pesticide applications will co-exist. Clearly, efficiency and safety are compromised. Furthermore, it could be argued that being locked in by play to make pesticide applications at a specific time, like Monday mornings, forces a preventative approach to pest management when curative might be a better option.

No one likes going to a doctor or dentist for needed treatment or medication. Inevitably such a trip will disrupt the schedule and cause some inconvenience. Yet, in the final analysis you feel better, which makes the days to follow more enjoyable and productive. In a like manner, properly timed pesticide applications will cause some inconvenience to golfers. In fact, specific product label requirements may force a short closure of the course. Turf health, course playability, and long-term value will all be elevated with proper and accurate pesticide applications.

## **The Lack of Needed Aerification**

This indicator applies to either the frequency or timing of needed aerification. While an aerification program must be custom fitted to a course's

needs, and thus may be different from that of a neighboring course, it is a vital component in quality conditioning. There continues to be a perception that aerification, especially of greens, means poor playing conditions for weeks following the work. This can result in aerification work being pushed away from what is the best time frame, or else completely skipped, to accommodate the short-term/immediate whining of players.

Schedule aerification when maximum agronomic value will be achieved. Use quality equipment and properly process cores and/or fill holes. This will minimize play disruption following the work and help assure the greatest efficiency. With greens, this means using a machine that punches straight in and produces round holes (not oblong), followed by the complete filling of the channels with topdressing. Play disruption will not be completely eliminated, but it can be held to a minimum.

## **Lack of Topdressing at the Correct Interval**

Similar to aerification, topdressing offers a number of agronomic and

playability benefits. They include surface smoothing and firming, along with the enhancement of upper-profile porosity. The key to achieving these benefits is consistency. In fact, inconsistent surface topdressing can result in upper-profile layering that could compromise agronomic health and surface firmness/smoothness. In other words, it is better never to start a topdressing program than to start and then allow play volume to compromise the work.

Verify the appropriateness of your topdressing sand through the interaction of an accredited physical analysis laboratory and your Green Section agronomist. A program then can be customized to achieve the desired results. Generally, the target is to integrate sand into the surface in sync with growth. An appropriate operating budget and needed equipment should be aligned before starting. Time will need to be blocked each week for the work to be completed. Rain will occasionally force the work to be done the next day. Trying to maintain a consistent topdressing program with heavy play on the course is unrealistic and, in reality, will eventually fail. The short-term play disruption, in pursuit of the benefits a good topdressing program offers, will pay dividends over the long haul.



*This player continues to enjoy the game even though the tees are being aerified. However, allowing play while aerification is in progress makes it more difficult for the staff to complete the work safely and efficiently.*

### **Compromised Mowing**

Heavy play that starts at or just after sunrise makes it difficult (if not impossible) to mow tees, greens, and/or fairways. Early morning shotgun starts further compromise needed maintenance

like mowing. Mowing at night or just before sunrise, in an effort to avoid play, often compromises quality and safety.

Although tees and fairways do not need daily mowing, greens do. Occasionally, triplex mowers are used on greens to help avoid inconveniencing the early players, even when the budget has adequate provisions for walk mowing. Walk-behind mowers offer a higher quality cut, a gentle smoothing/rolling action, and produce less stress on the turf. Clearly, this is a better option when the budget allows. Triplex mowing greens, when walk mowing is affordable, may indicate that maintenance is being compromised by play volume.

### **Heavy Divot Damage on Tees or Fairway Landing Zones**

While usable square footage and design will impact divot damage, traffic volume must also be considered. Too much play on too small an area results in poor turf quality. In some cases it may be possible to enlarge tees, add tiers, or expand landing areas. Yet, wear-related traffic ought to bring up the question: Should the rounds per year be reduced?

There is a handy formula that helps correlate the interaction of available footage, play volume, and the resulting



*Although it is important to receive enough play on the golf course to cover expenses, excessive play volume will compromise playability in the short term and impact course value over the long haul.*

turf quality on tees: *You need 100 square feet of usable tee area for every 1,000 rounds of golf played each year. On par threes, the first and tenth holes, or any hole where irons are normally used, you need 200 square feet of usable tee area for every 1,000 rounds of golf played each year.*

The above guide should be applied to tee construction, enlargement, and/or the adding of tiers. Furthermore, although there is no precise formula for other areas, always consider the interaction of usable area, traffic, and turf quality — on all surfaces.

### **Wear Around Hole Locations or Greens Riddled with Ball Marks**

This may suggest the need for more frequent hole moving, more consistent spoon-feeding, or cracking down on players who do not repair ball marks. Small greens with a lot of contour (thus, limited hole locations) clearly point to design limitations. Nevertheless, longer intervals between tee times, closing one day a week, eliminating play during the winter, or similar combinations to reduce play, may elevate conditioning and justify increasing fees, thereby offering similar, if not higher, income and better playing conditions.

### **Ornamental Plantings Used to Divert Attention from Poor Quality Turf**

There is no question that well-placed and well-maintained ornamental plantings can add a great deal to course appearance. Unfortunately, regardless of how attractive they may be, ornamentals add very little, if anything, to playability. Improper aerification or inconsistent topdressing cannot be countered with ornamental plantings. In a like manner, being forced to triplex mow greens, as a result of heavy play, and then utilizing the staff on remote sites (predominately out of play) to maintain ornamental plantings is questionable prioritization and a clear indicator that play volume is compromising maintenance.

### **Weed Populations Are Steadily Increasing**

The lack of weed control may well point to a maintenance program that is struggling to keep up with needed work. While weed control is a lower priority compared to needs like aerifying, topdressing, and/or pest control, the underlying message from a steadily increasing weed population may be too

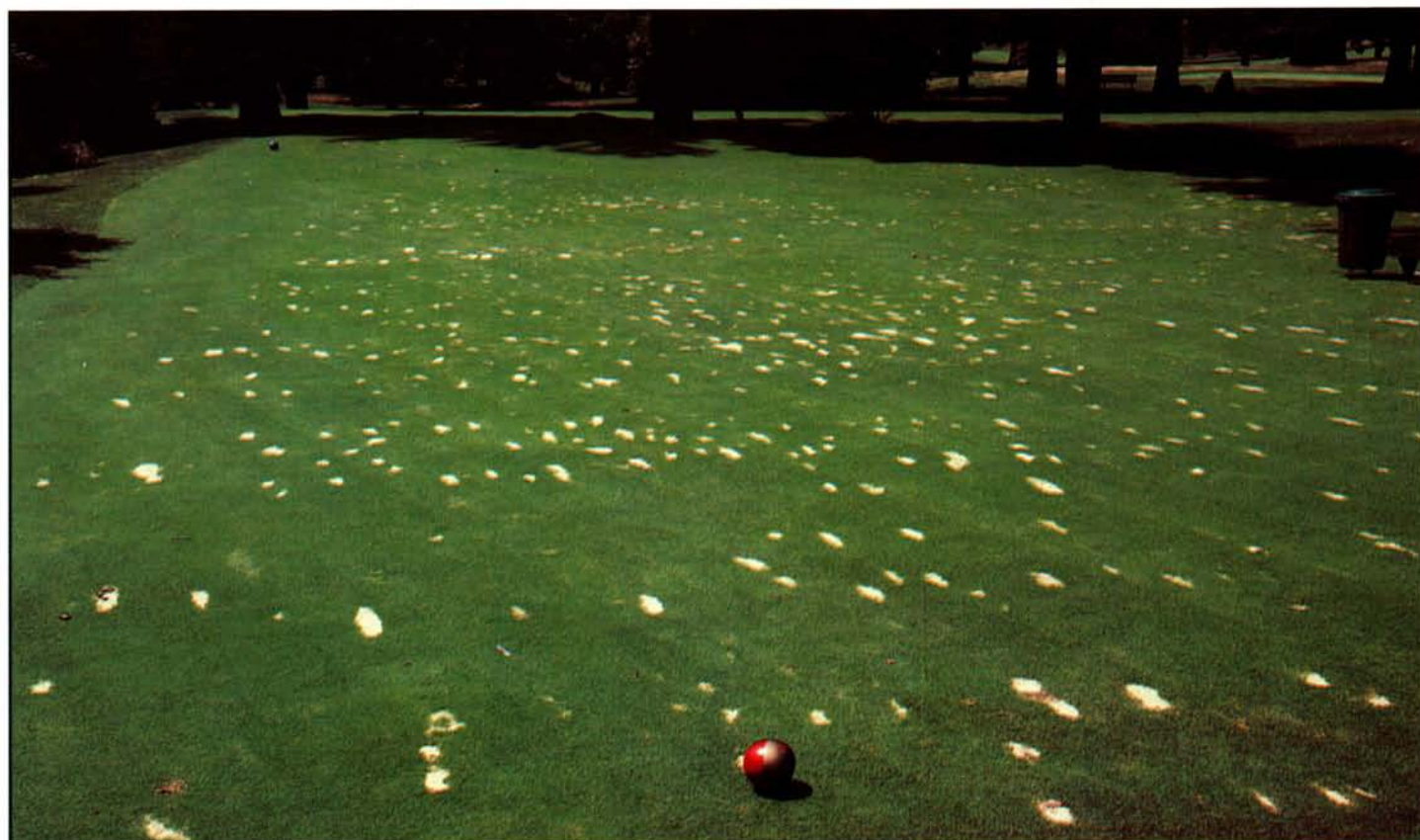
much play for proper course maintenance.

### **Conclusion**

Do not ignore the indicators that your course is receiving too much play. There may be other indicators specific to your course that could be added to those discussed. The bottom line is that proper agronomic conditioning of a golf course will cause occasional short-term disruption to play. Failing to acknowledge this fact and allowing play to dictate maintenance will cause deterioration in course value. Yet, the deterioration may be subtle and gradual, making it difficult to detect if candid objectivity is not guarded. Carefully identify the proper volume of play for your course and hold the line. Adjust play to needed maintenance work, not the other way around.

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*Too much play on too small of an area will result in poor turf quality. There is a direct relationship between usable footage, play volume, and turf quality.*