

Philosophy Versus Agronomy

It is important to know the difference — and when to stand your ground.

BY DARIN S. BEVARD AND KEITH HAPP



Naturalized areas add contrast to the more manicured areas of golf courses. However, their overall appearance and impact on playability can create disagreements among golfers, placing the maintenance staff in the middle of an awkward situation.

At every golf course, there are course officials. It may be the green chairman or president at a member-owned club, the owner of a private course, or the supervisor of parks at a municipal property. Regardless of the course type, the golf course superintendent must work with these officials and other department heads to communicate the needs of the golf course while defining the daily playing conditions on the golf course. Generally, the issues on the golf course can be broken down into a few categories, but two distinct divisions exist: philosophical issues and agronomic issues. Each of these areas can be a potential point of conflict between the golf course maintenance staff and course officials as the golf course is prepared for daily play. The question is: Which is more important, philosophy or agronomy, and what does each mean to you?

Webster's Dictionary defines philosophy as "all learning exclusive of technical precepts and practical arts." In golf course terms, philosophy loosely represents the definition of the playing characteristics of the golf course that are independent of agronomic issues necessary to provide good playing conditions. Sometimes, philosophy and agronomy are strongly intertwined. For example, whether or not to incorporate naturalized areas or where to locate them on the golf course is a philosophical decision. Actual establishment of such areas is an agronomic decision. Maintenance of these areas will link agronomy and philosophy. The level of maintenance of such areas also will affect the budget. What issues truly impact your ability to do your job? Does it really matter if a naturalized area is reduced in size, slightly modified or eliminated altogether to improve

pace of play? When a golf course superintendent takes sides on emotional issues, the results often do not favor the golf course maintenance staff.

Often, the most controversial agronomic program that superintendents deal with on a regular basis is putting green aeration. Putting green aeration is one of the most disruptive programs performed on a routine basis on most golf courses. Most golfers focus on the short-term inconvenience without realizing its positive impact on long-term performance. Inadequate aeration may have a significant impact on the long-term playing conditions that are presented, especially in severe conditions as those experienced in many parts of the country in 2010. Remember, you do not skip aeration; you simply defer it. The need for aeration remains, and the reasons to perform aeration do not go away. They simply



By far the most controversial agronomic program that superintendents deal with on a regular basis is putting green aeration. Golfers look at the short-term disruption with emotional disdain, while the turf manager knows that aeration is essential to produce long-term quality playing conditions and golfer expectations.

accumulate when this practice is not performed. In fact, at some point in time, aeration programs may need to be intensified to make up for lost time, which results in the potential for greater disruption. This doesn't even take into account the potential loss in playing quality when proper aeration is not performed and turf decline occurs. Implementation of proper aeration programs to manage organic matter on greens is something worth fighting for in the maintenance program.

When matters of agronomic importance are debated, the superintendent should offer a strong opinion and defend that position to encourage the right decisions to be made. At least, make sure that all parties involved realize the potential downside to compromising agronomic principles. Controversial maintenance decisions are controversial for a reason. Golfers are often focused on the short term, while the golf course maintenance staff and the superintendent, in particular, must focus on long-term impacts that will affect job performance months and even years into the future, not just in the next two weeks.

For philosophical issues, positives and negatives of a particular decision

should be presented to allow course officials to make an educated decision. The superintendent's opinion is important and should be offered, but it should be presented in such a way that you are not perceived to take sides.

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When it comes to capital expenditures, there is no better utilization of funds than to invest in the infrastructure of the operation. Prioritizing the expenditures can be emotional; however, investing in infrastructure that is essential to turf performance and its sustainability will return long-term benefits.