

Getting Back In Balance

Positive aspects of the new paradigm.

BY JOHN H. FOY



Challenging economic circumstances still exist for many Florida golf courses, but with focusing on sound agronomics, good quality conditions can still be provided. The grass just may not be as green.

Over the past three to four decades, golf course maintenance has greatly benefited from the American free enterprise system, technological advances, and abundant available resources. Along with a rapid increase in the number of golf courses in the United States, tremendous strides have been made in the level of course conditioning and quality provided at both private and daily-fee facilities. This certainly has been the case in Florida, and by the mid 2000s there were more than 1200 golf courses and the standards of course conditioning and quality had been raised to incredible heights.

And then the bubble popped An economic recession and the collapse of the housing industry have been especially hard to golf in Florida because of its close ties with tourism and real estate development. However, in hindsight, it is now apparent that growth projections were overly optimistic and supply exceeded demand in many locations. A market correction and reduction in the supply of courses has been occurring as a normal function of a free enterprise system. The closing of golf courses is unfortunate, but necessary for getting back in balance and having better utilization of the remaining facilities.

In Central to South Florida, there has long been a high concentration of superbly maintained courses that were well supported by the large number of people who come for the winter season. Accommodating expectations and demands of low-handicap golfers has always been a challenge, but over the past ten years this challenge has been successfully met. An additional, and in some respects more difficult,

challenge during the winter has been meeting expectations for wall-to-wall lush green and highly manicured turf and landscape plantings. Here, too, this challenge was successfully met, but it required higher inputs of fertilizer, water, pesticides, and labor hours and practices, such as winter overseeding. Yet, with a decline in private club memberships, rounds played, and in turn having to reduce operating costs, a more agronomically balanced and economically sustainable course management approach has been mandated.

In hindsight, the degree of over-manipulation for cosmetic purposes is easy to recognize. A case in point would be excessive nitrogen fertilization of bermudagrass in the central to southern part of the state during the fall, winter, and early spring in order to provide a lush and dark green color. Cutting back on fertilization because of budget reductions has resulted in the grass not being as green, but a dense and healthy turf cover through fairway and rough areas can still be provided. Also, with less succulent shoot growth, fairway lies are actually better, the roughs are not as penal, and the turf still has good wear tolerance. Additional benefits of more judicious nitrogen use are a slower rate of thatch accumulation, lower water use rates, and drier, firmer course conditions.

Better management of irrigation and water use is another positive aspect of a sustainable course management approach. It is not a criticism, but a fact, that golfer demands for lush green turf have at times resulted in over-irrigation of Florida courses. This is especially true at courses where large acreage

winter overseeding programs were being conducted. However, there has been a significant decline in the number of courses where winter overseeding is practiced because of the need to reduce costs. Again, while the grass may not be quite as green, better year-round course conditions are being provided.

With the necessity to reduce labor costs, cutting staff size and overtime hours has been necessary at many courses. In turn, this has required reducing the frequency that some routine tasks are performed. Backing off on course grooming and manicuring during the summer off-season may not be popular, but it has become a common compromise for ensuring that necessary basic agronomic programs can be performed. Furthermore, it is finally being realized and accepted that all bunkers do not have to be completely raked every day. This is a great example of where cost savings can be achieved and at the same time the common problem of very soft bunker sand minimized.

Given the economic circumstances that now exist, every aspect of golf course maintenance must be closely scrutinized and some changes in long-time standard operating procedures made. Yet, staying focused on sound agronomics, it will be possible to stay in balance and continue to provide appropriate and good quality course conditions.

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