

March Madness: *It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times*

March Madness is upon us. In the golf industry, March Madness is much more than a month. It is a state of mind that lasts throughout the spring. It begins with the NCAA basketball tournament, continues with the first major championship of the golf season, and continues well into the summer. For golf course superintendents, March Madness can be the best of times or the worst of times. And the funny thing about March Madness in the Southeast is that one superintendent can be mired in the worst of times while his neighbor is enjoying the best of times. This is not a cruel twist of fate. Instead, it is expected and it is occurring for a reason. In this article, we will examine several maintenance strategies that dramatically influence golfer attitudes during March Madness. We will also make an attempt to offer guidance for superintendents, owners, and course officials when these issues arise.

Fairway Overseeding: *Beauty or the Beast?*

Our office receives many questions about overseeding. Are these questions asked in June, August, or October? No. Are they asked during March Madness? Absolutely, and there is a simple reason why it occurs every year. There is no doubt that compared to thriving, gorgeous perennial ryegrass, a non overseeded bermudagrass fairway, tee, or rough looks like the homeliest, sickest nag anyone has ever seen. Triple the despair if winter annual or grassy weeds are thriving. The solution is simple then, isn't it? Overseed next year and enjoy the best of times. Before making the leap, be sure to read the next paragraph.

To sort through the confusion of the overseeding / no overseeding dilemma, let us start with an understanding of why golf courses overseed or do not overseed. The majority of golf courses that overseed do so because they place more of a premium on what the golf course looks like with mature overseeding and less on how the golf course plays.

A quality overseeding program does not happen accidentally and overseeding has direct and indirect costs. Overseeding requirements such as seed, labor, fertilizer, water, different herbicides, equipment wear and tear, etc. are direct costs. These are easy to calculate. Indirect costs are more difficult to estimate. For example, if green grass attracts golfers in the spring, what is the cost in revenue if the golf course experiences turf decline during a bad transition in the summer? What is the cost in extra sod, fertilizer, water, labor to grow in weak bermudagrass turf after a bad transition? What is the cost in terms of dollars and enjoyment when the overseeding establishment ruins the best time of year, the fall, for bermudagrass fairways? What is the cost when, not if, *Poa annua* becomes a larger issue in the putting greens? These indirect costs are hard to estimate, but make not mistake, they are real costs.

The majority of golf courses in the southeast region do not overseed bermudagrass areas and they do so for a specific set of reasons:

1. Playability throughout the entire year is valued more than course appearance in late winter or early spring. Dormant bermudagrass is a fine playing surface. It can be kept at a high level of quality all winter if cart traffic is restricted to cart paths.
2. A no overseeding program allows the golf course superintendent to set up his entire maintenance program around the needs of the bermudagrass. Every day the temperatures are warm enough to grow bermudagrass, the bermudagrass is growing free from competition.
3. No overseeding is more environmentally friendly because it uses fewer resources: less water, fertilizer, and pesticides.
4. No overseeding is less expensive in both direct and indirect costs. Lower costs keep the game more affordable for more people.

The key to determining if an overseeding program is appropriate for a golf course is to focus on both the intended and unintended consequences of overseeding. Review the factors above. Calculate expected direct costs and estimate indirect costs. Review expectations for turfgrass quality during each season of the year on non overseeded and overseeded golf course. Most importantly, remember that with either system, turfgrass quality will not be optimal every week of the year. Once a decision is made, stick with it and when experiencing the worst of times, remind everyone why the decision was made in the first place.

Core Aeration: “They Don’t Do This at Other Courses”

Another one of the rites of passage in spring is core aeration. Although a few brave souls have tried no aeration during the spring, in the end they have paid for this decision dearly with deterioration of the putting surfaces over the long term, particularly in the summer. Unfortunately, we are sad to report that we receive many calls and questions similar to this one “What can we do about this practice of aeration? Other courses don’t do this and those that do, use smaller tines that heal more quickly.” In order to get to the bottom of this question, we must separate the myths from the facts.

Myth: Other courses do not aerate.

Fact: Core aeration is recommended highly in the spring. Core aeration followed by filling the holes with sand topdressing and surface topdressing applications are two key components in an organic matter dilution program. Virtually all courses in the Southeast with bentgrass putting greens core aerate in the spring.

Myth: Aerating twice as often with tines $\frac{1}{4}$ inch tines impacts as much surface area as one aeration with $\frac{1}{2}$ inch tines, assuming the spacing is the same.

Fact: It would require four aerations with $\frac{1}{4}$ hollow tines to equal one aeration with $\frac{1}{2}$ inch tines assuming the spacing is the same. Also, larger tines create bigger holes which are much easier to fill with sand.

Myth: Aeration ruins the greens for six weeks.

Fact: The aeration date plays a major role in the healing time of the aeration holes. Aeration performed on March 1 in the southeast will have a much longer healing time than aeration performed on April 15 assuming all other factors such as fertility are the same. The reasons are warmer soil temperatures and longer days.

One of our standard recommendations to help make March the best of times on bentgrass putting greens is to schedule the aeration at a time when healing time is kept to a minimum. In other words, the golf course should schedule aeration when it will disrupt as few days of golf as possible. Some clubs in the Southeast have decided to move aeration into mid-April for these reasons. To further minimize aeration disruption, private clubs can work together on scheduling aeration dates and create a reciprocal agreement with a nearby course for play during aeration recovery periods. Aeration always will be the worst of times for putting quality, but it is a necessary evil and it can be managed to keep the pain and suffering to a minimum.

Conclusion

We have reviewed a few reasons why March is indeed so maddening. It is a time of year when the best of times and the worst of times are on a collision course like two ships converging in the open ocean. Unfortunately, there is no early warning system to avoid this. The crash is predictable and it happens every year. Anticipate it. Get ready for it. And most of all, remember that March Madness will end. And then the Summertime Blues arrive, but that's another story. . . .