

GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT: WORK DIARY - JANUARY 2013

Overview

2012 will be a year that most course managers will wish to forget. It seems a distant memory that the year started with a drought and hose-pipe bans for many, at least in England, followed by the wettest 9 months this country has ever recorded. So many rainfall records were broken throughout the year and so many areas flooded, often more than once. A year many will want to forget! December started with cold, crisp and frosty conditions before ending with relentless downpours over the last 2 weeks, culminating in rainfall totals being in excess of 150mm (6ins) for much of the country. After the 12th of the month, there was barely a dry day which meant that golf courses lay continually wet, some being closed completely. Faced with these type of conditions, only those courses with superb natural drainage could offer reasonably good playing conditions. However, even on the 'drier' links courses, water tables were so high that bunkers lay submerged for many days until levels were reduced. For others, especially on heavier soils, it was often a case of damage limitation and doing as best as possible to provide acceptable playing surfaces. With rain falling on already saturated ground, it was all about having effective drainage and moving excess water from playing areas into drains, ditches or other outlets as quickly as possible and as long as they too were not submerged. With conditions being challenging to say the least, only a small number of courses were able to achieve any project work of any note. Even clearing the last of the season's leaves proved difficult for some, with hand operated blowers being required in the wetter areas. Perhaps even more challenging was the need to apply a contact fungicide on greens which were soft, while just getting to some greens proved difficult for some. Either walk booms or small pedestrian sprayers were required in order to keep disease at bay. With spraying opportunities few and far between, those who were able to apply products such as iron and dew repellents, generally benefitted from having cleaner and drier surfaces, especially over the festive season when staffing levels were at a minimum; this being an example of good forward planning. Previous articles have highlighted the need for turf to be healthy and free from stress heading into the winter and this is the time when it is put to the test. Where Fusarium did take hold, it was imperative to treat the turf as soon as a possible, preferably with a multi-mode of action fungicide which eradicates the current attack and then protects others from being infected. Earthworm activity also remained high in areas which are susceptible and not previously treated with Carbendazim. Fortunately January 2013 is due to start on a mild and drier theme as of late, but whether or not this will continue is anyone's guess. Previous January conditions have seen high rainfall and continuous frost as well as dramatic snow falls in 2010. This is traditionally the coldest month of the year, with average UK temperatures of just 3.2° Celsius. Over the last decade, temperatures have generally been higher which increases the risk of higher rainfall. Perhaps and more so in the past, Course Managers could rely on cold and frosty conditions in January, therefore it is best to be prepared. Should mild and wet conditions prevail, then additional stress could be placed on turf and playing conditions, with golfers keen to maximise their time during favourable playing conditions. On the positive side and although light levels remain low in January, towards the end of the month, the hours of daylight slowly increase and limited afternoon golf again becomes possible.



Is holing-out really necessary when frosty?

Greens

With UK temperatures in January usually at their lowest, virtually all plant growth will be dormant. Under normal conditions, the main emphasis will be to provide playing surfaces of suitable quality that are firm, dry and as smooth as possible. These criteria will largely centre on drainage, soil type, grass type and environment. After so much rain in recent months, greens also require a period of 'settlement' in order to provide smoother putting surfaces. Greens with poor surface or sub-surface drainage and high levels of organic matter will not provide these 'ideal' conditions. Therefore long term objectives should be to create a better growing environment and to use the past year as a reference point for future improvement. The question of frost and temporary greens is likely to be a 'hot' topic should frosty conditions prevail. Apart from managing the greens in a sustainable manner, the question is whether or not to allow the greens to remain in play or to protect the surfaces and use temporary greens. For more detailed information and

recommendations, refer to the article 'Winter Play Revisited' which appeared in Pitchcare's magazine in March 2009. Two key recommendations mentioned were to utilise a two-hole system whereby one such position would be close to the front edge of the green and this to be used during periods of hard frost. The idea being to allow play on the main green, thus maximising revenue but to limit any potential damage to a small peripheral area of the green. The other recommendation during frost is to instigate a one club length rule from the hole, whereby any ball inside this diameter becomes a 'gimme'. This has the advantage of avoiding holing out, thus reducing wear. It also helps in speeding up play and introducing an element of fun during adverse playing conditions when golf becomes somewhat of a lottery and more as a form of exercise. Disease risk from Fusarium will probably still remain high in January unless sub-zero temperatures are the norm. This will keep Fusarium at bay but it will not eradicate it. Mowing should continue each week when conditions allow but more as a requirement to roll and clean the surface with the height of cut at 5mm or higher. Aeration should remain as a key priority in order to allow as much air as possible into the root-zone, but only when ground conditions are favourable to accommodate heavy machinery. Following up with a light roll and a small amount of sand dressing afterwards will help to 'firm-up and settle' the surface but avoid smothering the grass. Fertiliser requirement will be low but if sandier root-zones are showing signs of 'leached' nutrient loss then a very small amount of Nitrogen can be applied along with a higher level of Potassium. The addition of sulphate of Iron or one of the many chelated products on the market will give enhanced colour but if the intention is for disease control, then only the former will prove effective. Continuing to keep surfaces dry remains the key objective, therefore brushing and switching must feature on a daily basis. The use of a dew dispersant, as mentioned previously, will also help but may only be effective for a couple of weeks.

Tees

Maintenance requirements this month are largely a continuation from those in December with good playability being the key priority. Whatever grass tees are in use, the requirements remain the same, namely clean, dry and firm surfaces. Therefore regular brushing, periodic tining and light sanding will be the norm along with varying degrees of traffic control, especially on raised tees. Here, there is a tendency for bankings to become worn if there are no designated access points. Where worm control was completed in late Autumn, there is a possibility that a repeat application will be necessary since the effectiveness of Carbendazim is limited to a maximum of 3 months. A periodic trim with the mower will help to clean and present the surfaces but best to keep the height of cut well above 12mm. Should the turf be lacking in colour, vigour and ability to recover from wear, then a low amount of Nitrogen can be applied to help replace any loss from leaching. Where artificial teeing mats are in use, then these should be brushed clean on a daily basis.



Surrounds

Traffic control measures, 'grit-sand' dressing and possible worm control will be the main requirements this month in order to maintain adequate turf cover and to provide good playing conditions. Similar to tees, aerify when ground conditions are suitable, penetrating as deep as possible to alleviate any compaction. Ensure that any outstanding turf repairs are completed this month in order to give the turf time to 'settle' prior to Spring. It is unlikely that any additional feed will be required at this time of year but there are always exceptions. If required, then fertilise as per tees.

Fairways

January can be a key month for deep tine aeration if ground conditions remain favourable. Operating a deep tiner with varying degrees of 'heave' will prove beneficial for removing surface water and to maximise air movement through the soil. Slitting is also beneficial and much quicker but really needs to be completed a few times over the winter to make any real difference. As stated previously the use of a rotary decompactor may prove effective to remove water from areas between drainage laterals or into suitable outlets. If mild weather continues, then a periodic pass with a mower will help to tidy and define the surface but avoid removing any real amount of grass cover. Fairways prone to divots should also be cleaned regularly and the holes filled where



possible. A useful ploy is to give the fairways a foliar application of Iron and Urea to give the turf a 'green-up' tonic. This is more of a cosmetic approach but does enhance presentation at a time when courses often take on a 'bleached' appearance. For less than £20 per fairway it can be money well spent at a time when many clubs are looking for that competitive edge.

Deep tining of fairways – a key cultural requirement for growing healthy turf

Bunkers

Winter playability and consistency will remain the two key requirements, therefore good drainage is fundamental. Much time may be required in this area if the bunkers tend to hold water and suffer from wash-outs or erosion. Refer to the December article on renovation work which should be nearing completion by the end of this month, especially where turfing work is required. On a more routine basis, the requirements are to maintain adequate depth and sand on the faces along with regular brushing of sand from the surrounding banks.

Other

Lakes/Ponds/Ditches: January can be a good month for clearing the sides of ditches and to trim back any overhanging branches or to remove unwanted scrub vegetation such as alders. These have a tendency to restrict the flow of water. All ditch crossings should be checked and surfaces maintained in a safe and appropriate manner.

Paths: Throughout the winter, paths should be kept free of pot-holes and any standing water. Small drains may need to be cut to alleviate such problems and path ends should be regularly 'grit-sanded' where necessary. Additional traffic control measures may also be required to divert traffic away from main or wet lying areas. Alternative routes during winter are good practice and help to protect the main playing areas during the 'off-season'. Aeration work on walkways should only be completed when ground conditions are suitable.

Trees:

As mentioned last month, tree trimming, branch removal and scrub clearance should be a key part of winter maintenance and especially when weather conditions limit main course work. There is often a tendency for scrub encroachment around tees which are close to boundaries or woodland, therefore it is important to keep all areas clear of such invasive growth which restricts air flow. General woodland management throughout the course helps to reduce ball searches, improves air flow and keeps the course tidy. Whatever the reason, such work should form part of the larger environmental plan for the course and not just limited to areas of woodland. Hedgerows, wetlands, gorse, heather and grassland will all come under this 'environmental umbrella' and the dead of winter is an ideal time to make in-roads into this area of work.

Renovation Projects: This is likely to be an on-going program of work with projects such as drainage, ditch work, bunker renovation, tee levelling/extensions and path work. With work likely to have been previously halted when ground conditions became unsuitable, it is important to make up for lost time and to only focus on tasks which are likely to be completed before the start of the new season. A hard frost can be an advantage for some work eg movement of materials and base building, whereas it can be a hindrance for any planned turfing. If alternatives can be provided to suit conditions then both angles can be covered. For most golf courses, tee extensions and bunker renovations will be an annual requirement and form part of an on-going rolling plan of improvements.



Bunker renovation project well underway

Watchlist:

Disease: During January, disease pressure from Fusarium could remain high if wet and mild conditions prevail therefore appropriate action needs to be taken. Should greens be covered in snow for any length of time, then the risk of snow mould will again increase significantly. Previous winter periods of snow cover have highlighted the need to apply a fungicide in advance of prolonged snow cover but this is seldom a clear cut decision due to the uncertainty in predicting such occurrences. A 'careful eye' on the weather via one of many related web-sites is a good starting point and will help to remove much of the guess work. The application of a protective fungicide is a viable option and it all comes down to the element of risk versus the cost involved. Enough has been mentioned in previous monthly articles on disease control, the fungicides available and their modes of action but it is the 'basics' that need to be in place as part of the IPM strategy. The best plan of action is to improve turf conditions and to keep a watchful eye on weather forecasting.

Pests: Only earthworms are likely to be a nuisance to managed turf during January, therefore control from Carbendazim will be required as mentioned in previous articles. At this stage of the season, this is more likely to be a second application and may be limited to just key areas where wormcasts are having a negative impact on playing quality.

Turf Disorders: As per last month, both Algae and Black Layer will continue to be the most likely turf disorders at this time of year and both have been mentioned in detail in previous articles. Moss may also be quite prevalent due to the lack of turf vigour and low levels of light intensity. For many areas it is just a slight winter 'nuisance' and soon disappears when Spring returns. If more persistent, then moss control will be necessary but January is not the time for such work other than to carry out routine practices of aerification and perhaps a little use of sulphate of Iron.

Equipment:

By the end of this month, servicing, repair and overhaul of equipment should now be over half complete. During January & February, only a few mowing machines will be in use and only for periodic use, therefore it is during the latter stages of the winter that the emphasis will switch to these machines. Sharpening of reels and replacement of bottom blades are a key requirement therefore it is important that all such replacement parts are in stock and readily available. As well as servicing of equipment, each machine should receive a deep clean and this is a good job for a wet day when other work is less desirable. Various cleaning products are on the market that can make a positive impact on metal, vinyl and rubber. A gleaming, well maintained item of equipment sends out a clear and professional message of good management as well as giving a sense of pride to the staff when operating these machines. When equipment is properly maintained, clubs are more likely to be sympathetic when it comes to the time to replace or add an additional item of equipment.

Compound:



The start of the year is also a good time to operate the 'new broom' strategy with the aim of starting afresh. This means a thorough clean-up and re-organisation of all internal and external areas of buildings and compound. Staff room, toilet and wash areas will probably require a deep clean then a re-paint and days when the weather is poor are ideal for such work. With a few staff at hand, this work can be completed quickly and once again gives a sense of pride and achievement of a job well done.

Good example of tool storage. Tidy & organised with floor space clear of clutter