

GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT: WORK DIARY - MARCH 2013

Overview

With February being largely cold and dry; this the third time in the past 5 years, indicating a change in direction from past years where milder temperatures have been the norm. For much of the month, overnight frosts and cold east winds meant that day time temperatures were below average. Last month was also the driest since March 2012, finally bringing an end to constant run of wet conditions, at least for the time being. Last month's comment on being patient with regards to surface preparation of greens was hopefully well heeded since the turf was under mild stress for much of the month from cold, easterly winds. Apart from drying the surface which is good for golf and reducing disease risk, loss of colour and possible leaf scorch were issues faced by some course managers on sites where greens are exposed. With weather conditions being fairly static, at least the first few days in March are likely to be more of the same. Any growth will be negligible and for the time being, it is better to leave as much grass cover on greens, tees and fairways as possible and avoid causing any further and undue stress to the turf. With winter seeming to 'drag' somewhat for many this year, will March bring about a welcome change. The last two March's were exceptionally dry and with next to no rain for most of the UK in the past 2 weeks, small amounts of rain will not go amiss. This will help to stop turf drying out, especially if newly laid on tees, surrounds and bunker banks. It will also help to kick start some early growth and aid recovery. For most of us, March is regarded as the start of Spring with average temperatures in the UK rising to around 5° Celsius. Although day time temperatures are over 3° higher, the potential for overnight frosts and cold evenings will 'pull back' any real signs of growth apart from those regions in the south of England. Past data indicates that even in the south of England, 3 to 5 days of overnight frost can be expected in March. Rainfall figures since 2000 have shown a trend of being below average; the only two exceptions being in 2001 and 2008 where heavy rain continued to delay the onset of Spring and hampered most pre-season work. With this information at hand, there is a need to be prepared as best as possible and that means 'priming' irrigation systems and avoiding adding stress to the turf while recovery from winter continues. Rain or no rain, the amount of sunlight will be considerably more than in February and by the end of the month the hours of daylight and darkness will be equal. Often there will be days when Spring has most definitely arrived whereas other days will feel like a return to winter, therefore beware of the 'false Spring'. Remember it's still March, so don't push too hard too soon!



Greens

March is a good month for pre-season renovation work to take place and before competitions get underway and visitor play increases; the 'unofficial' start date being the 1st of April. Soil temperature for many, will not rise above the 8° Celsius mark until the latter half of the month, therefore recovery and growth will be in short supply until well into April. Therefore in order to provide an acceptable playing surface, there needs to be a balance between the agronomic needs of the turf and the wishes of the golfers. That said, much will depend on the condition of the greens at the end of winter when the plant's carbohydrate (energy) levels are low. Recent trends have shown that many Course Managers prefer to carry out solid tining or coring work with 10mm tine sizes and then follow-up with micro-coring in April. The down-side however is that it is more difficult to fill the smaller tine holes with sand, especially when surface conditions are more likely to be moist. The larger 13mm coring operation is then left until August when conditions are usually ideal for such work and a much faster recovery ensues. Where deep scarifying is the preferred option for thatch removal, this practice is best carried out later in the season when there is sufficient growth for recovery. Attempting to deep scarify in March when cold easterly winds are likely to follow is fraught with potential problems as well as golfer annoyance, so best to avoid if possible. Prior to any light scarifying, coring or tining work, the greens should be given a Spring start-up feed or tonic, but just enough to encourage growth and recovery. Products containing around 3 to 4% Nitrogen and a higher amount of sulphate of Iron are often popular, especially if moss 'discouragement' is required. A main pre-season or base feed, usually with a granular

product would then be applied in April. The first main top dressing of the season will quickly follow the chosen cultural practice where as much as 1 ton per green of dressing would be applied; this depending on the size of the green and whether or not core or deep tine holes need to be filled. Less would be applied if no major 'cultivation' work is carried out. Any planned over-seeding should be held back for a few weeks until soil temperatures are favourable for germination. The temptation to reduce mowing height should be left until the greens have 'settled-down' and there is clear evidence of recovery, therefore the HOC should remain at around 4.5 to 5mm for as long as possible. Beware the false Spring! Any risk of a late surge of disease pressure from Fusarium should be minimal but avoid pushing growth and smothering the surface with top dressing. March should see the bulk of the pre-season work completed but more will be required the following month before the playing surfaces move nearer to the desired level. Should dry conditions continue throughout the month, then only irrigate as little as possible and to avoid the upper root-zone profile from becoming overly dry. Water temperatures will be very low, which in turn will slow down growth and recovery, therefore judging how much to apply and when becomes a fine balance. Limiting tine size width to 10mm or less is also advisable if cold easterly winds prevail but to full depth where possible. As always, the above is an overview or generalisation for the UK and where shade, wind exposure, high rainfall and so on persist, then such conditions need to be 'factored' into the overall management plan. In other words, what may work well for those in the west of Scotland may not be so for those in England's south east and vice-versa.



Applying a light Spring Tonic foliar feed of Nitrogen & Iron

Tees

For teeing areas, much will depend on whether or not the main playing areas are being rested or have been in use throughout the winter. If the former, then ideally they should be fertilised, tined, dressed and over-seeded before being brought back into play. For tees which are in use all year round then much the same is likely to apply, although a small section may be left undisturbed to accommodate play for the next 2 to 3 weeks. For larger teeing areas this may be an option but where teeing space is limited, it really comes down to doing the best possible in the current situation. Where separate winter teeing areas are in play then any renovation work should be



Maintaining a clean teeing surface while growth is limited

undertaken once they are no longer in use, which for most will be the following month. Similar to greens, tee mowing height should remain at a higher height until growth commences and new seedlings have germinated. Any over-seeding that takes place will have a better chance of success if top dressed afterwards and mowing height is not lowered. If 'unused' tees are showing high levels of moss, then treat with an appropriate product or even just sulphate of iron prior to scarifying work late in the month. It usually takes about two weeks for any product to weaken the moss sufficiently.

Surrounds

Towards the end of the month, there should be the first signs of recovery from winter wear. Heavily 'trafficked' areas will be the last to recover and where this is the case and in spite of installing traffic control measures, such areas should be renovated similar to tees. For many courses, this may require tining, top dressing & over-seeding these small areas where grass cover is weak. Once treated, these areas should be protected as much as possible from resultant wear. Only in essential areas should re-turfing be contemplated due to the risk of the turf drying out. Where this is deemed necessary then the possible need for watering must be readily accessible. Green Surrounds can be fertilised late in the month if required and conditions are favourable. Too often, ground conditions can dry out fairly quickly if winds are in an easterly direction and such applications should be held in abeyance until warmer and moisture conditions prevail. If cold and dry conditions continue for any length of time, a foliar feed may give some respite without the risk of leaf scorch. Regular checks on 3 to 5 day forecasts are essential.

Fairways

This is the last month that deep tining work can be carried out before the season gets underway. Although best carried out earlier in the year, ground conditions may dictate that this is not possible. Fairways often take on a bleached appearance in March due to 'cold wind' scorch and lose any real definition due to nutrient loss over the winter. This scenario can be overcome by applying a soluble mix of Urea and Iron which many would regard as being more of a 'cosmetic tonic'. 25kg bags of Urea and Sulphate of Iron will roughly treat 2 fairways (2 Ha) and should be at a cost of less than £300. This may help to give the club a competitive edge and should suffice for a few weeks until higher temperatures allow for normal growth. Where nutrient levels are low and the turf is in need of a boost, then a suitable fertiliser can be applied from late in the month onwards, especially in the southern half of the UK but this will be moisture dependent. Controlled release fertilisers have proved popular in the past but they are more expensive and can lead to a build-up of excess fibre. Every course is different and applications can vary from Foliar applied a few times per year to more Sulphur based granular products that have an acidifying effect on the turf. This would generally be applied once or maybe again in Autumn as a winter feed. Mowing will continue but again the height of cut should remain high since the risk of overnight frosts will not have disappeared just yet.



A light application of Urea and Iron to fairways to give added colour and presentation during early Spring

Bunkers

The emphasis should now focus on presentation and playability for the coming season, since all major renovation work should now be complete. If general trimming, edging and topping up of sand levels is not already underway, then a start needs to be made as soon as possible. Additional sand should have sufficient time to 'bed down' before the new season, but if not then it can be watered and consolidated using a 'whacker plate' or roller. This will help to avoid the 'plugged lie' syndrome in bunkers. Since growth around bunkers is likely to be sparse, the removal of excess sand is essential. A back pack blower is ideal for this purpose. Weak areas can be fertilised and where possible, a sufficient length of grass can be left on the bank or bunker face, especially on south facing slopes. Where renovation has taken place earlier in the winter, such bunkers should almost be ready for being brought back into play, although any recent turfing work may have to be watered; probably via a bowser until irrigation water is again available.

Other

Paths: Once the main work to greens, tees and surrounds etc are complete and following bunker edging and cleaning, paths are likely to be next in the list of priorities for pre-season renovation. Once any holes have been filled and any debris scraped clear or removed, then a light path dressing of the appropriate material should be applied, possibly via a belt dresser type hopper. Freshly re-surfaced paths can give an enhanced aesthetic appearance to the course and a good practice is to treat and apply on a regular basis as opposed to a full scale and costly renovation. Where path ends have become worn, they should be treated as per green surrounds and given protection from wear as much as possible. If re-turfing has to be carried out, then top dress quite heavily with a compost mix to prevent the turf from drying out.

Course Accessories: This is the last month for these to be cleaned, repaired, re-painted and ready for changing in time for the start of the new season. Any items such as flag pins, hole cups, bunker rakes & so on that are required, need to be ordered well in advance to prevent any undue delays. Hazard markers are often painted 'in situ', especially if there are numerous ditches or water features present on the course. Wet days are ideal for internal painting and then storing on some form of racking system.

Watchlist:

Disease: Pressure from disease is likely to be very low at this time of year, especially if cold, dry weather continues. Should conditions turn milder and wet, then conditions may favour a possible outbreak of Fusarium. Where disease scarring has occurred, then maximise air intake by multi-tining the greens using the small micro tines or even the ¼ inch coring tines if severe scarring has occurred. In these circumstances it is essential for recovery to be as quick as possible and allowing

more air into the soil will allow the turf to heal. Applying a light turf tonic will encourage growth and recovery but only over-seed if necessary and when soil temperatures are constantly above 6° Celsius.

Pests: Apart from any lingering earthworm activity, leatherjacket damage may be rearing its head at this time of year. It is not uncommon for the larvae to have survived the winter and as they grow larger, their appetite for food becomes greater. Roots of turfgrass can be eaten and the first signs of such damage can be increased bird activity and/or discolouration of the turf as the roots die back. Old tine or core holes often provide an ideal resting place for the grubs and 'nibbled' hole tops are a sure sign that the holes are or have been occupied. Fortunately leatherjacket grubs can be easily controlled using the active ingredient Chlorpyrifos and then mixed with a suitable penetrant to give maximum effect.



LEFT: The 'tell tale' signs of leatherjacket damage to old core holes

RIGHT: The culprit identified – leatherjacket grub

Turf Disorders: See past comments regarding algae and black layer and last month's note on moss and its control. Leave any aggressive moss removal until late in the month or even into April but do apply an appropriate control product containing sulphate of iron in advance as mentioned earlier. The aim should be to get the basics right then moss invasion in future is likely to be less troublesome. In other words, treat the cause and not just the symptom.

Equipment & Irrigation:

All major overhauls, servicing and sharpening of equipment should be completed by the end of March and with service records brought up to date. With previous very dry Springs still fresh in everyone's memory and next to no rain for nearly two weeks, there is a greater urgency to prime and test the irrigation system sooner rather than later. A list of any leaks, damages or poorly performing sprinklers should be compiled, then it's a case of prioritising what repairs and components are needed. Start with both irrigation and submersible pumps, followed by the main pipe and cable lines, then finally valves and sprinklers. Most pipe fittings and other essential components should be held in stock, otherwise ordering needs to take place asap. Initial testing of the system may take more than one day to complete and golfers should be advised in advance that such work will be in place since no one appreciates a cold shower in March!

Compound:

See previous articles regarding cleaning, painting and organising, all of which should be completed by the end of this month.

Staff:

As stated last month, this time of year and before the new season gets underway, is the ideal time to complete staff appraisals. Training should be on-going both internally and out on the course with all records brought up to date.