

The Sports Turf Industry Weathering The Storm

By Dave Doherty

The last five years have probably been the most difficult in the history of the sports turf industry. Recreational dollars have been at an all-time low and financing in many cases has been very difficult to come by. A recent article in the GCSAA Industry Spotlight indicates some of the difficulty:

“Looking for a little good news about the golf industry? The number of rounds played is continuing a slow but steady climb. The most recent national report of rounds played issued by the National Golf Foundation, Golf Datatech and Weather Trends International indicated that the number of rounds played in November 2012 was up 2.6 percent versus November 2011. Year to date, rounds played are up 6.1 percent when compared to 2011.”

The article adds that the percent of increase and decrease of rounds played by geographical areas in the USA, shows: The West North Central region a 26.7% increase, Mountain Region 20.5% increase, South Central region a 14.6% increase.

On the flip side, rounds played along the Eastern Seaboard of the USA were down 30.8% and the New England region experienced a 17.9% decline.

Is weather the cause of these increases and decreases of rounds played? Not of itself, however it *has* played a role but the lack of recreational dollars has also played a role. The most common but not the only thread that is consistent with the courses that are doing well is that 99.9% have very good to excellent playing conditions.

The most valuable asset of any golf course is the greens. We can have a \$100 million clubhouse, a master chef, the finest cutlery and the most trained staff, but if the greens are not in the condition that players have come to expect, we will have a clubhouse catering to luncheons and card playing, and neither of those two by themselves covers the overhead.

Every course with good to excellent greens also has good to excellent **physical properties** in their greens' material. The USGA recommended guidelines are for new construction materials and do not necessarily apply to greens once we seed, sod or sprig as the greens age. The physical properties of greens must also be compatible with the microclimate in which they reside.

For instance, greens that receive adequate sunlight and have good air movement will normally need / require different physical properties than those that have limited sunlight and limited air movement. The different types of turf (Poa, Bent, and Bermuda) will also in most cases require different physical properties. The number of rounds played, size of greens, and cupable areas will have a tremendous impact on the physical properties as well.

The chemical and biological factors of our golf greens cannot function properly if the physical properties are out of balance.

I am still amazed that only 25 to 30 percent of our North American golf courses do regular physical properties' testing. If your course is among that 70 to 75 percent that

does not do regular testing, I strongly urge you to think strongly about starting a physical properties testing program. Balanced physical properties will in most cases lead to savings on the chemical side of the maintenance budget.

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