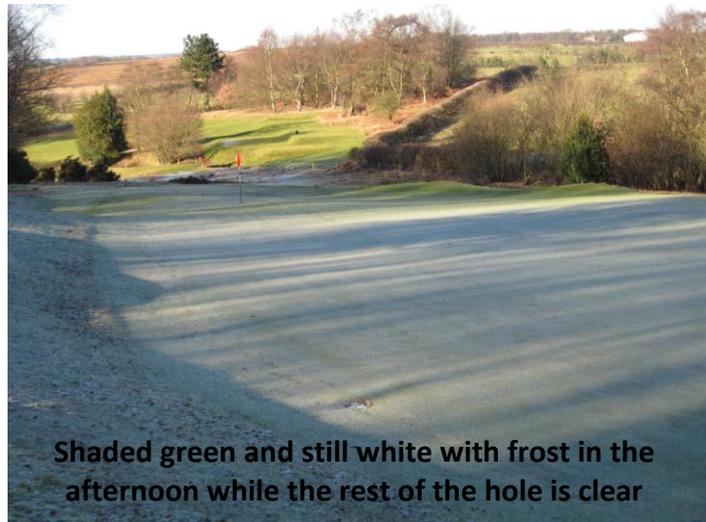


GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT: WORK DIARY - FEBRUARY 2012

Overview

During the first week of 2012, much of the UK was hit by a series of storms, causing various degrees of wind damage and localised flooding. Fortunately, it didn't last and the rest of January was generally milder and drier than average, with around 8 mornings of frost, most of which were at the end of the month. This of course varied across the country. With snow showers limited to generally high ground, the vast majority of courses remained playable throughout the month and both maintenance and any development work could continue without too many interruptions. Dealing with wet areas, worn walkways and pressure from disease were the main challenges for most, while the drier and more open courses could continue with more ambitious projects and work programs. Although February is regarded as being the last of the winter months, it can always provide a sting in the tail. However, most Februaries as of late have generally been milder than average although in 2009, snow cover did last for around a week. Snow cover for any length of time in February is rare but with average temperatures of only 3° Celsius, there will be little or no growth. Hours of sunlight become marginally better and daylight gradually extends to nearer 6.00pm by the end of the month, at least in the southern half of the UK. Only twice in the last decade has there been significant rainfall which equates to a 1 in 5 chance. There may be the first signs of growth, more so in the south of England if milder temperatures prevail but this may be short lived as cold easterly winds take hold. From past experiences, golf courses can often take on a 'bleached' appearance following many days of these conditions and sub-zero temperatures. This is often typical for this time of year when the turf has used up much of its energy reserves (carbohydrates). Therefore the message is 'tread warily' and avoid causing undue mechanical damage to the turf wherever possible. Turf stress on the lead up to Spring should be avoided at all costs since recovery time can be painfully slow and golfer's patience severely tested.



Shaded green and still white with frost in the afternoon while the rest of the hole is clear

Greens

Plant growth will enter February in a dormant state and likely to remain that way for much of the month. However, there may be circumstances where there have been sufficient milder days for slight signs of growth as day time temperatures rise. In these circumstances and after probable leaching of nutrients in previous winter months, a light 'turf tonic' can do wonders for surface condition and presentation. This involves applying a small amount of Nitrogen, Potassium and Iron, possibly mixed with amendments such as seaweed and humic acids. This should be more of a 'trickle' feed to meet the plant's needs, since a number of colder days and overnight frosts will inevitably continue for several weeks to come. With February generally being a drier month, there should be several opportunities to aerify the greens at varying depth and to give the surfaces a very light dusting of sand dressing. A pass with a turf iron or similar will quickly smooth the surface and leave both golfer and turf manager satisfied. The risk of Fusarium disease should be reduced but if mild and wet conditions prevail, then be prepared to act accordingly with a contact fungicide. Mowing should continue as per January, ie cut and roll at 5mm or higher to clean and smooth the surface as opposed to removing grass. Should problem areas arise due to poor draining hollows, surface algae, black layer and so on, look at methods to alleviate these conditions. Most are likely to relate to surface drainage problems therefore checking the drains and then ensuring that water reaches the drains are the key requirements. Intensified aerification of such areas followed by the addition of sand and a Zeolite amendment such as Axis will help to dry the surface and allow greater air space within the root-zone. The objectives are simple, namely to maintain firm, dry and free draining surfaces with good levels of light and air movement. In other words, get the basics right and use modern equipment and availability of new products to assist in producing good turf quality. The focus must always remain on turf & soil health and that requires a good growing environment.

Tees



Deep tining tees to 200mm depth. Clean, fast and efficient with Wiedenmann GXi

Where teeing areas are being rested then fine, little needs to be done other than a trim and tidy and refilling washed out divot holes. Worm control may also be required, possibly as a second application of Carbendazim if the site is prone to their activity. Tees which are constantly in use or possibly those which are sand based, may show a loss of vigour and colour through the leaching of nutrients. These can be lightly fertilised, supplying mainly N & K but only if soil temperatures are near to 6° Celsius or above. The aim is to provide firm, dry and level surfaces with sufficient cover of a tight knit grass sward. When conditions

are favourable, windows of opportunity should be taken to achieve this objective by aerating at varying depths and possibly lightly sanding afterwards to maintain a firm and dry surface. Avoid the temptation of cutting too low at this time of year since it will only add to the risk of moss invasion. February is usually the last month to tackle any last minute re-leveling requirements so ensure that any renovation work is completed by the end of the month, to avoid turf from shrinking and drying out while irrigation systems remain shut down for the winter. It is worth remembering that rain virtually stopped on the last day of February in 2011 therefore early completion of such work is advisable. This is also the last month to remove markers and signage for cleaning and repainting.

Surrounds

With virtually no growth and zero recovery from any resultant wear, it is essential that the emphasis remains on traffic control measures, sand dressing and possibly some aerification work if ground conditions are favourable. As with tees, a second application of Carbendazim for worm control may be necessary if it has not been applied earlier. Apart from any last minute turf repairs or drainage work, this should be a quiet month for this part of the course unless there are particular problems to overcome.



Aerified and sand dressed walkway by ditch crossing providing good, firm and clean access

Fairways

February is often a key month for deep tine aeration if ground conditions are favourable. As stated in the previous month, operating a deep tiner with varying degrees of 'heave' will prove beneficial for removing surface water and to maximise air movement through the soil. If slitting is the desired option then be aware of cold drying winds opening the surface, particularly on exposed courses on the east side of the UK. As with Surrounds, this is really the last month for any late winter turf repairs or small drainage projects, if the turf is to 'settle-in' prior to the start of the season. By this time of year, any problem areas will have been identified therefore work should be based on priorities, taking into consideration available funding and resources. Mowing should still continue but only to clean and 'mark' the fairways for presentation. Removing divots and filling holes with an appropriate dressing is also worthwhile at this time of year and sets a good standard of presentation. See last month's comment on a winter 'green-up' turf tonic as part of the same process.

Bunkers

Any renovation or drainage work to bunkers should be nearing completion by the end of the month, especially if turbing of banks are involved. Apart from any major work, February is a good month to start work on trimming, edging, cleaning and sanding of bunkers in readiness for the new season. This gives new or additional sand time to 'bed-in', thus avoiding typical member complaints of 'fluffy' lies or balls plugged on the face. The use of a 'wacker plate' can help to consolidate new sand therefore this may be a useful ploy. After 'Green Speed' bunkers are usually the main issue

for member dissatisfaction therefore planned maintenance work in this area is essential and it is work that needs to be completed to a satisfactory standard. With a high level of importance being attached to bunker playability and presentation, this aspect needs to be part of a club's overall policy and any work should form part of a rolling plan of improvements that is fully documented.

Other

Lakes/Ponds/Ditches: More a continuation of that commented on before and the need to keep ditches clear from debris and overhanging branches to ensure good water flow. Some may need to be trimmed with a mechanical digging bucket every few years and this work is ideally suited for this time of year as long as ground conditions are suitable.

Paths: February is probably the last month of just topping up pot-holes, edging and scraping of surfaces as part of an on-going winter maintenance plan. Next month and when courses generally become drier, is the time when re-surfacing work comes more to the fore as the risk of wash-outs and heavy rain become less. Traffic control measures should continue where it is necessary to divert traffic away from main or wet lying areas. These alternative routes are good practice during winter whereby they help to protect the main play areas during the 'off-season'.

Renovation Projects: With February usually being a drier month, there is often an opportunity to 'catch-up' with unfinished projects and for these to be nearing completion by the end of the month. Early morning frosts are ideal for moving bulk materials whereas the afternoons can prove more favourable for turfing work. Tees, bunkers, ditching and 'localised' drainage work are the most common small projects on golf courses, largely to address current issues. Once again it is important to record and then communicate such work to the club via newsletters, reports & so on, in order to keep golfers up to date with what is happening on their course. Before, during and after photographs is good PR work. Should adverse weather prevail then woodland and other environmental work may prove more appropriate.



Neat set of timbered steps providing wide access to the tee

Watchlist:

Disease: Pressure from disease risk is likely to be low to moderate at this time of year, but much will depend on the prevailing weather conditions. Depleted nutrient content in the soil will be fairly common to many courses after the leaching of plant nutrients therefore turf vigour will be low. This in turn can lead to Fusarium but generally unlikely. Following prolonged snow cover, snow mold could be a problem but again this is rather unlikely and difficult to predict. Last month's article covered this aspect in more detail.

Pests: Only earthworms are likely to be a nuisance to some areas of the course during February therefore control from Carbendazim will be required. Since this is more than likely to be a second application at this late stage of the season it should only be applied if really necessary since the likely impending drier conditions will favour a decline in worm casting as well as the costs incurred. Golf courses which are prone to chafer grub and leatherjacket damage need to regularly monitor turf for signs of insect feeding or bird and animal activity, since the grubs are regarded as a delicacy and considerable damage can occur as a result.



High presence of moss on raised part of green where grass competition is weakest

Turf Disorders: Apart from previous comments regarding algae and black layer, moss could well be troublesome in some areas. With low levels of light and plant nutrients, the grass loses its competitive edge against moss, perhaps more so on sand based root-zones or on impoverished fairways. It is too early in the season to be aggressive against moss, therefore better to aerify, feed lightly and apply a little Sulphate of Iron to discourage its spread and encourage grass growth.

Best to avoid over-feeding since once temperatures and day light are on the rise, the pendulum swings in favour of grass growth. It is again another example of getting the basics right in the first place.

Equipment:

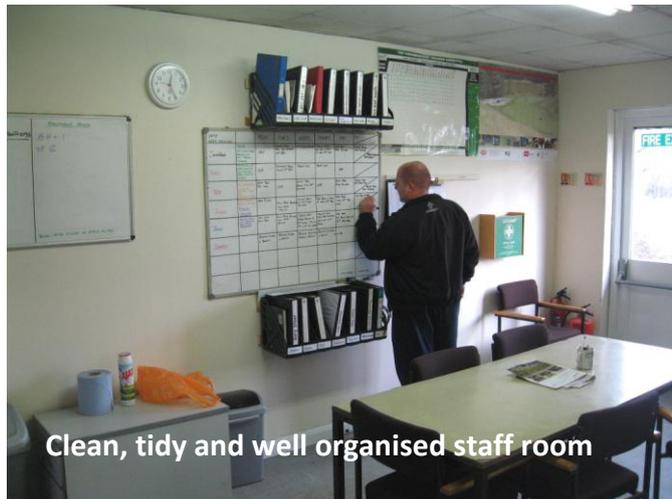
See previous article regarding cleaning and maintenance of equipment. Suffice to say that all major overhauls, servicing and sharpening of equipment should be nearing completion and all such work recorded in a system of service records and wipe board information. On courses in the south and east of England, provisions should be made to prime and test irrigation systems early next month or in some instances the last week of February. In 2011, both March and April were 'drought' months therefore better to be prepared in advance should water be required to irrigate new turf or even existing and exposed greens.

Compound:

If not already started, then this should be the ideal 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 during days when the weather is less ideal for external work. This work can be completed quickly and once again gives a sense of pride and achievement of a job well done. Tidy compound, tidy course!

Staff:

February is also an ideal time to catch-up with training staff on some items of equipment and work projects and to bring these records of achievement up to date in the training manual or log book. Another essential requirement is to complete staff appraisals. This is an ideal opportunity to let them know how they are performing and what direction and help each employee needs in order to develop their own careers. This is a two-way process whereby each staff member expresses his/her comments and desires on what is important for their well-being and personal development. It is also worth remembering that labour costs amount to around 65% of a typical maintenance budget, therefore spending time in this area is both sound management and good for staff morale.



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31/01/12