

A Question of Credibility

Don't believe everything the "experts" tell you.

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

Maybe the comments are made to jolt sleepy golf fans from an afternoon nap. Maybe the comments are designed to start a wave of misinformation to drive golf course superintendents over the edge. Or maybe today's television golf announcers have not done their homework. In any event, TV golf fans, our beloved golf announcers are weaving inaccurate agronomic information into their otherwise insightful analysis.

Here is the problem. Bad information undermines credibility. Below are a few gems I personally have heard over the airwaves, along with my corrections. These are summaries and not direct quotes because I did not think to write them down at the time. I wish I had.

Example 1: The difficulty with foliar-fed rough. *The rough at this US Open venue is going to be particularly difficult this week because it is foliar fed with nitrogen. This foliar-fed rough is so thick it will wrap around your club and . . .*

The problem with this theory isn't whether the rough was fertilized via a foliar (liquid) nitrogen source or a granular nitrogen source. It implies that grass fertilized with nitrogen via a foliar treatment is somehow more difficult to play a golf shot from than grass fertilized via a granular treatment. Heavily fertilized, tall grass is going to be difficult, regardless of the nitrogen source.

Example 2: A new hybrid. *He doesn't have much of a shot at all. His ball is in the thick fine fescue bermudagrass rough.*

Perhaps this announcer did not have his morning cup of coffee. Fine fescue bermudagrass does not exist. Maybe he was confused because the golf course

in question had bermudagrass rough and tall fescue planted under the trees. Where fine fescue bermudagrass came from is anyone's guess.

Example 3: Grain on the brain. *The grain breaks toward the setting sun. The grain runs to the water because that's what the grass wants. The grain runs toward the ocean.*

Does grain or a general orientation of grass exist? Yes. Can it influence putts or golf shots? Yes. Does it break toward a body of water, the sun, a planet, or a statue all the time? No. Most of the time the grain is oriented with slope.

Example 4: A sandy tale. *This sand is great. It is manufactured and the members had it shipped halfway across the country because it is so difficult to play from.*

If you must know the truth, the perceived quality of sand is inversely proportional to its proximity from the club, particularly if other top clubs use it. The farther it must be shipped and the more expensive it is, the better it must play. Top private clubs do not select sand because it is difficult to play from.

Example 5: Dart boards. *The creeping bentgrass putting greens are soft in August because the superintendent had to put extra water on them to keep them alive.*

Wrong answer. The creeping bentgrass putting greens are soft because the root system has died back. The once-live roots that anchored the plant are swollen with water and in varying states of decomposition. This is why the putting greens are soft.

I like most TV golf announcers and it is unfortunate they miss the mark on so many topics related to agronomy. It is frustrating when they take basic

information, much of it provided to them, and start developing their own theories. The announcers don't realize it, but their comments have implications among the rank and file golfers, too. They take these theories back to their home courses and often add their own twist. "Our bentgrass greens are soft in August because the superintendent overwaters . . . We picked the wrong sand for our bunkers because it wasn't manufactured . . . Our greens don't putt well because they are grainy."

Imagine for a moment if correct information was disseminated from TV commentators: "The greens this week are soft because bentgrass roots die in the heat . . . The rough is so tough because it was fertilized and the mowers were raised . . . All grass on greens has grain and the key is to determine which way it is growing." This would be great information for golfers to take back to their home courses.

There are two paths out of this mess. The first one is to hope that commentators will reach out to the most trusted source of excellent information, the local superintendent. Unfortunately, hope is not a good plan, particularly when some of the offending announcers have a long rap sheet of getting it wrong. A second approach would be to put someone with agronomic expertise in the booth. What a novel idea! This announcer would get it right the first time and would be a source of reliable information for fans and colleagues. Instant credibility!

CHRIS HARTWIGER is a senior agronomist in the Green Section's Southeast Region.