

Unreasonable Expectations

Expectations may be great, but standards should be reasonable.

BY ROBERT VAVREK

A short, well-written set of maintenance standards is a valuable document for any private or public golf course. Standards help define what playing conditions golfers can expect to find on the course throughout the season. Green speed for day-to-day play, heights of cut for the various playing surfaces, irrigation practices, bunker maintenance, and schedules for aeration and topdressing are examples of issues addressed in a typical standards document.

In my opinion, far too many courses spend a great deal of time and effort to develop a set of unreasonable, unattainable standards that only serve to set the table for golfer dissatisfaction. These standards read more like a wish list of what the course hopes to achieve with respect to speed, firmness, bunker conditions, etc., versus what the players will likely experience during an average round of golf.

Maintenance standards fall flat on their face most often when they define and mandate inappropriate playing conditions for a particular time of the season. For example, current standards at a highly regarded course in the North Central Region include a statement that greens will be maintained to provide speeds of 11 to 12 feet from May 20 through October 31. To achieve these standards, the greens will have to be cut short and pushed very hard at the start of the growing season, and this could compromise root growth. Aggressive management well into late fall provides little opportunity for turf to recover from summer stress and harden off properly before winter. Furthermore, have fun punching holes in the greens through the snow. Better yet, try coring greens during April and then try to achieve the unreasonable speed standard by mid-May.

Standards based on sound agronomic principles and reasonable expectations will complement the turf maintenance program, but unreasonable standards will eventually prove counterproductive. Is there any surprise that this course lost plenty of turf on putting greens during August when an unseasonably cool spring was followed by a brutally hot, humid summer? There's a good chance these standards were proposed and approved by the small group of mostly skilled and competitive players at the club.

An effective way to avoid issues associated with unreasonable expectations is to have the proposed standards reviewed by an independent agency before they become golf course policy. The USGA Green Section agronomists are ideally suited for this task because they make site visits to evaluate the turf management programs at a wide range of courses every season.

Better yet, Green Section involvement early in the process can help define and prioritize an appropriate set of maintenance standards for a

particular course, taking into consideration the limitations of the maintenance budget. Far too often, a short, concise policy of what can and will be done on the course will expand and balloon into an unwieldy novel of hopes and wishes that far exceed the available resources.

Moreover, encourage input from all levels of players when developing the standards document. After all, the standards will affect all who play the course and all who pay dues or green fees, not just the small percentage of low-handicap players. Don't paint yourself into a corner by defining goals that can never be attained. No doubt, reasonable standards are an asset. However, better to have no standards at all rather than ones that include unrealistic goals that you cannot afford or goals that constantly compromise the health of the turf.

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Well-defined maintenance standards provide the guidelines that define course conditions for day-to-day play. Reasonable standards are an asset to any course, but constantly trying to attain unrealistic goals can drain the maintenance budget and compromise the health of the turf.