

“Sick Turf”

How does one solve the problem?

It starts with understanding why “Turf is Sick”? So many superintendents jump into a problem so quickly they fail to properly understand why the problem even exists. One just becomes consumed with fixing it without trying to identify what is causing it. As a result, one goes into reactive mode. Let’s put out the fire and figure out the “Cause and Effect” later. How many times have you heard this statement? “I threw the kitchen sink at it.” This means I must do something quick to stop the bleeding and get things turned around and headed in the right direction. Basically, this is a shot gun approach. We hope we hit something that works. There are many great minds that believe that diagnosing the problem is at least 50% of solving the problem or more. If the problem is properly diagnosed, then solving it is an easier task. However, this is where the superintendent is challenged. He or she is so set on immediately solving the problem, and the real problem is often overlooked as the culprit.

Russell L. Ackoff is quoted as saying, “We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem.”

An example of this was a golf course that had “Sick Turf” on some of the fairways that kept thinning out. It was so bad that it was adversely affecting playability. It was decided that the underlying problem was nematodes after checking the threshold levels. Treatment of the nematodes began by using a variety of products to bring the turf back to a healthy state by suppressing or eliminating them. This process became very intense as well as expensive. Unfortunately, the treatment process to revive the turf or prevent its decline did not work by treating for nematodes. The turf got sicker and sicker. It became evident that the problem was not being solved by treating nematodes. Wetting agents, fungicides, fertilizer, etc. were then used to sustain the “Sick Turf” and take some stress off the poorly rooted grass, but these practices also failed. Then a decision was made to remove the diseased turf and plant Celebration Bermuda. That was the answer! The “Sick Turf” would be gone. New fairways would improve playability and eliminate the chronic problem of “Sick Turf”. Finally, it would be over with, brand new grass for the fairways with lots of fresh amendments would resolve the problem. The fairways were planted, and everyone including the superintendent felt like this was the solution. Euphoria was in the air along with lots of optimism. However, as the Celebration began to grow, it too became sick. How could this be? “The kitchen sink was thrown at this problem to solve it.” Now another attempt was failing. As a result, the existing superintendent gave up, and a new one came in and a new approach was implemented. Since nothing

had worked it the past, the only thing left to do was evaluate all things that had been done in the past. It was concluded that pre-emergent herbicides might be the problem. After a full season of stopping them, the newly planted grass along with older fairways started to improve and take on new roots. The “Sick Turf” problem was solved. The actual problem on the sandy fairways was not the result of nematodes causing poor rooting, unhealthy turf, disease, etc., but too much pre-emergent herbicide being used to control weeds. Once this was realized, the turf was no longer stressed. It responded to all the good agronomic practices that were put into place.

When it comes to grass, I have always believed that grass wants to live, it does not want to die. It is like any living organism; it will try and adapt to the environment it is in to be self-sustaining. The idea is to put a lot of thought into why the problem exists. Don't jump into solving a problem too quickly. Work on identifying why a problem exists more than solving the problem. A lot of times, solving a problem is easy if the problem is correctly identified.

Albert Einstein goes even further to say, “Given one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and 5 minutes finding the solution.” While a bit dramatic, the message is still as important as ever.

I remember one time I was consulting with a golf course with relatively new greens and a new irrigation system. The superintendent was complaining about the greens not draining.

He was contemplating everything from deep tine aerification, core aerification, etc. to using every product one could imagine for improving the drainage. The greens would puddle with one turn of the head. After watching the heads turn and talking through the problem, the superintendent called the irrigation company. He found out that the wrong stators and wrong nozzles were on the sprinkler head. If this problem had not been identified correctly, it would have led to a lot of other solutions to rectify the problem with the wrong solution, and that would have been very unnecessary and expensive.

Being a golf course superintendent is one of the most problematic professions in the world. Dealing with problems is a tough and rigorous task. Problems must be solved in short order, or they can sometimes manifest themselves into major challenges. Solving a problem is a prerequisite to keeping the golfers happy and staying on top of one's job. However, trying to solve a problem too quickly may sometimes create other problems if there isn't enough thought put into why the problems exist. When problems arise, put lots of thought into them before trying to solve them. If one diagnoses the problem correctly, solving it will be a much easier task. Don't prematurely try solving a problem when your impulses take over to do something too fast. This may lead to catastrophic results that can become expensive, frustrating, and irritating. Consider all the variables. Constructively think through the situation. Be your own external consultant. This will allow you to look at things from the outside in. Have you ever heard the

saying: You can't see the forest for the trees. Step back and look at the big picture. This will make problem solving a more efficient process and help you identify the cause and effect more accurately.

So, the next time you have a problem with your greens or elsewhere, look in the rearview mirror. The solution to your problem may lie there. Sometimes it is not the abiotic stresses or biotic stresses that cause problems; it is your own ambitions to push playing conditions to the limit, or a simple mistake that was made trying to make things perfect. We are all guilty of over-the-top perfection. So, think about this the next time you are trying to make things perfect. The enemy of good is perfection!

In the future when a problem arises, be your own consultant by looking at things from the outside - in and ask a lot of questions. This will most likely lead to the right solutions to the right problems. You know your situation better than anyone. Good luck and be constructive in your approach.