

# CUTT

Fall 2002 • Volume 13 • Number 3

## The Cost of Perfection

“I don’t like this time of year,” proclaimed Monroe Miller, golf course superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club, Madison, WI, in his monthly article for the *Wisconsin Golfer*. “I dislike this time of year because it is budget time.” The economics of providing high quality golf turf conditions are growing more complicated and expensive. Golf course superintendents are being challenged to provide flawless conditions as budgets tighten and expenses increase.

A survey of the Illinois Green Industry published in 2002 revealed that golf courses ranked the ability to control costs and budget issues as two of the top five most important factors limiting their ability to provide quality golfing. “My biggest expense continues to grow every year,” says John Carlone, CGCS at The Meadowbrook Club, Jericho, NY, “its my labor expenses and this year I’m around 60%.”

Labor costs consume on average 55 to 65% of the financial resources on golf courses. Within the labor costs, 60% of the labor is employed for mowing and irrigation. “If we have to provide perfection,” continued Carlone, “we are going to have to spend more money.”

### Country Club Economics

“Many country clubs invested in improvements during the 1990’s,” says Bill McMahon, Chairman of the McMahon Group, Inc., a private club consulting firm from St. Louis, MO, “this will position many clubs to weather a recession.” Specifically, while many clubs are experiencing declines in business usage for par-

ties and outings, rounds of golf by women and juniors have increased.

“The golf course,” states McMahon, “is still the cornerstone of a successful club, i.e., when a club is successful, they have a quality golf course.” A quality golf course—especially at private country clubs—is expensive. A 2002 McMahon Group Private Club Survey reported average golf course maintenance budgets for Midwest and Northern US clubs with initiation fees greater than \$50,000 (16% of survey respondents) was about \$1.1 million. The same clubs in the southeast and southwestern US averaged \$1.4 million.

*continued on page 4*

## This Times

1. ***The Cost of Perfection***
2. ***Short Cutts***
  - Dan Peck joins Turf Team
3. ***Scanning the Journals***
  - Abstracts from 2002 American Society of Agronomy Meetings
6. ***Horticulture Analytical Laboratory***
7. ***Allelopathic Fescue***
8. ***Plant Disease Diagnostic Clinic***
10. ***The Lawn Reader***
13. ***Short Course & Field Day***
16. ***Biological Control of Turfgrass Diseases***

CUTT, “CORNELL UNIVERSITY TURFGRASS TIMES” is published four times per year by the Turfgrass Science Program at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853. Address correspondence to: CORNELL UNIVERSITY TURFGRASS TIMES, 20 Plant Science Building, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853; phone: (607) 255-1629; email: fsr3@cornell.edu.

Editor: Frank S. Rossi, Ph.D.

Design & Production: Ghostwriters, inc., Ithaca, NY

Cornell University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action educator and employer.

CUTT is copyright © 2002 by Cornell University. All rights reserved. Permission to reproduce any material contained herein must be obtained in writing.

The use of product names or trademarks in this newsletter or by Cornell University does not imply any endorsement of such products.

*“There is no clamor to go back to less costly slow greens,” writes Miller, “yet we want to keep rounds reasonable so players can still put the \$550 driver in their bag.”*

*Consider that new pesticides are costing in excess of \$100 million dollars to bring to market with time critical patent issues that might limit cost recovery. It is not surprising that one product might cost over \$300 per pound and when applied cost as much as \$8 per 1000 square feet treated.*

## The Cost of Perfection

*continued from page 1*

McMahon’s survey does suggest that “lower tier clubs” are under severe pressure from struggling semiprivate facilities. “A few public-daily fee courses,” says John Fulling, CGCS at Kalamazoo Country Club in Kalamazoo, MI, “are in receivership here in western Michigan.” The implication from superintendents and sales people are that an oversupply of golf courses in some areas could reduce the number of facilities, especially in blue-collar regions.

### Big Tickets

“There is no clamor to go back to less costly slow greens,” writes Miller, “yet we want to keep rounds reasonable so players can still put the \$550 driver in their bag.” A 2002 survey of private clubs in the northeast by Condon, O’Meara, McGinty and Donnelly accounting firm in New York City, found that maintenance budgets per hole exceeded \$46,000, with Westchester County, NY spending over \$49,000.

Several recent turfgrass surveys indicate that equipment costs are rising with replacement of some large mowing units capable of mowing 15 acres per hour costing over \$50,000. Consider the new Toro Flex 21 hand greens mower priced in the neighborhood of \$8,000 per unit. A fleet of these hand units were loaned to the Bethpage State Park for the 2002 Open Championship. The mowers received rave reviews from volunteer superintendents and players who benefited from greens mowed at 0.065” with reduced stress.

How many courses that will be asked to produce ball roll distances in excess of 10 feet on a daily basis will be able to get by without specialized mowing units? The ones that don’t might be investing more heavily in fungicide

chemistry to prevent diseases resulting from mechanical stress of fixed head units set below 0.10” that scalp undulating surfaces.

Consider that new pesticides are costing in excess of \$100 million dollars to bring to market with time critical patent issues that might limit cost recovery. It is not surprising that one product might cost over \$300 per pound and when applied cost as much as \$8 per 1000 square feet treated. An average course may have 2 acres of greens (80,000 square feet), 5 acres of tees (400,000 square feet) and 35 acres of fairways (1,400,000 square feet). Treating the entire playable surface to prevent a devastating disease outbreak could cost \$15,000 for a single application.

### BioTech Costs

Syngenta announced layoffs of over 200 staff members in the Crop Protection Discovery Unit, housed in Research Triangle Park, NC. Financial analysts attribute this to the success of St. Louis, MO based Monsanto’s genetically modified crops. In fact, Heinz Muller an analyst with DZ Bank in Germany, reported that genetically modified plants led to a reduction of 21 million kilograms (about 10 million pounds) of pesticides used worldwide.

How will this type of technology influence economics in the golf industry? Initially one could surmise not as dramatically as production agriculture that each year plants new crops. The perennial nature of turf will alter the economic equation. This point has not been lost on the Scotts Company which is currently developing Round-up resistant creeping bentgrass.

“We want to capture about 80% of the cost savings,” says Wayne Horman, Marketing

Project Leader for the Scotts Company. There is an assumption, rightly so, that it will cost less to manage creeping bentgrass without annual bluegrass infestations. There will be cost savings in fertility, pesticides, growth regulators, and water use. When a course invests in the genetic technology there will have to be a mechanism in place to capture the cost annually.

*“Perfect” playing fields under high traffic may not be possible.*



*An emphasis on increased green speeds will require increased resources.*



### Simpler Times

James Dodson writes in his most recent book *The Dewweepers* (2001 Penguin Books, NY, NY), "My best rounds are when I just hit the ball, walk after it, and hit again—dewweeping." No worry about course conditioning, just play it as it lies. Playing the game for the simple reasons of getting outside, exercising your body and your mind does not require stimpmeter readings in excess of 10 feet.

Tom Doak bemoans the role that the cart path has played in altering golf course design. "I just hate building concrete roads through the middle of my courses because so many American golfers are too out of shape or too lazy to walk," Doak writes in the September/October 2002 issue of the *Michigan Golfer*. "In fact," he continues, "the developer's rule of thumb is that it adds \$5 to every green fee thereafter, whether you ride or not."

Each year I marvel at the increased quality of course conditioning. The modern superintendent has brilliantly integrated science and art to meet the expectations of a demanding consumer. Much of this is predicated on money. Technological inno-

ventions, biological, chemical or mechanical, will always answer the call when money is no object.

Is the golf industry going to experience the decline we are observing in the dot com industry? I wonder, with our complete reliance on fossil fuels for everything from mowers and pesticides to fertilizers and irrigation pipe, if the supply is disrupted and prices rise will turf quality suffer?

It is more than numbers when it comes to the art and science of golf turf management. The best superintendents will weather difficult economic times if their communication skills are able to convey the cost of perfection.

*Frank S. Rossi*

*The demand for "perfect" lawns drives the need for pesticides.*



*Is the golf industry going to experience the decline we are observing in the dot com industry? I wonder, with our complete reliance on fossil fuels for everything from mowers and pesticides to fertilizers and irrigation pipe, if the supply is disrupted and prices rise will turf quality suffer?*