WINTER GOLF - PART 1:
SAFETY AND AGRONOMY CONSIDERATIONS

In the first of a series of three articles, David Weston, writes about safety on the golf course.

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Safety Considerations

The Owner/Management/Board of Directors have the responsibility of ensuring that the course is safe to play. The club must have a written Safety Policy with clear guidelines as to how that policy will be implemented. The two inherent dangers on a golf course are limited visibility and the danger of slipping:

- **Visibility:** The criterion for visibility will be the same summer or winter; an object approximately 230m away from the Club House that must be visible for play to be permitted.
- **Slipping:** The danger from slipping is much more difficult to judge. Slopes covered in frost or mud can present a slipping hazard, as can frozen artificial tees, or frozen or wet sleepered steps, bridges and tracks. The Management must give guidance to the staff judging the fitness for play, or face the legal and financial consequences should an accident happen.

Agronomy Considerations

The last 30 years have seen a gradual increase in the acceptance of golf as a winter game. The two most importance factors leading to more winter golf have been the improvement in waterproof all-weather suits and increases in subscriptions. Golfers may now play on a cold wet day and remain dry and warm within their winter gear, and as subscriptions have increased some members can justify their subscription expenditure only if they play winter, as well as summer, golf to "get their money's worth". The classic links courses have always had winter golf because the nature of their sandy sub-soil is relatively free draining, and playing during the winter produces only a small but acceptable amount of compaction. The same is true for the inland heathland course and to a lesser extent the downland courses. However for the courses that are on parkland or farmland, on clay or a heavy soil, extensive play can cause severe compaction.

If aeration measures are in place to relieve the problem, then winter golf may be possible without compromising good summer playing conditions. During cold winters the temperature of the ground at root level may be too low for grass to grow (under 8°C). There may be no chance of the replaced divot taking root, and if the course is heavily used then continual divot removal may cause an unacceptable deterioration in the quality of the fairway grass.

To appreciate the compaction problems faced by the Greenkeeper it is necessary to understand the way in which a clay-based soil drains. Because of the limited air/water spaces between the soil particles capillary action tends to stop gravity drawing the water into the drains. The balance of the two forces controls the height of the water table. On sand or USGA Specification Greens, the capillary action is minimal and water will drain quickly through the soil profile. However, if there is clay or a heavy soil under the green, the water builds up in the soil profile and if there is sufficient rain, usually on top of previous rain, the greens will flood. This situation is similar on the other areas of the course. When the ground is saturated with water, allowing golf to be played, results in the ground surface being sealed as feet (bad) and trolleys (worse) compress the soil and water together to form a sealed mud surface layer. Unless that seal is broken by mechanical aeration then the air and nutrients necessary for summer growth are not available to the grass, and its growth will be affected. The problem is compounded by the trolley-pullers always taking the same route round the course, especially away from tees and round greens. If only they would keep their trolleys in the semi-rough, the majority of trolley restrictions could be avoided.

It is extremely difficult to formulate a policy that can be applied consistently to determine if a course should be "Open with no restrictions", "Open with a Trolley Ban/Main Greens", "Part Open with a Trolley Ban/Winter Greens" or "Closed". If the course is safe to play then the club may have to assess the long-term damage of allowing winter golf under adverse conditions. This long-term damage may manifest itself in the various areas of the course not achieving good summer playing characteristics until later in the year. With the advent of recent warmer winters, it has become even more difficult to make a judgment call as to whether allowing play in winter has been harmful to the course, especially if the club has an extensive aeration programme to negate any compaction effects.

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