



## Technical Note

# WINTER PLAY

The aim of turf management is to keep play on the main greens for as near 12 months in the year as possible. With milder winters becoming the 'norm' the demand for year-round golf has increased together with the need of many clubs to 'keep members happy' faced with the difficult economic environment currently being endured. However, this need to maximise winter play must be matched with the drainage qualities, soil type, aspect and elevation of the greens in question as well as prevailing weather conditions, particularly as milder winters also tend to be much wetter.

An indication of the type of damage arising from play under adverse conditions is given below and, whilst appreciating that golfers expect winter play, these requirements must be kept in perspective. Most competitive golf and important fixtures take place outside the winter period. Winter golf is normally less competitive and if the little inconvenience caused by playing to temporary greens of a satisfactory standard is accepted, when necessary, then the putting surfaces of the main greens are better preserved for when they are required and expected to be at their best.

### WET CONDITIONS

In persistently wet conditions, the soil around the pin is likely to become severely compacted. Fine particles of silt and clay can migrate to the surface, resulting in soil-stained patches round pin positions and other well trafficked routes. All of these effects weaken the turf and impede surface drainage.

In essence, the aim of greens management should be to develop firm and dry surfaces to minimise the effects of wet weather. A sound aeration programme will help minimise ill effects on drainage and the sward. In addition,

hole changes should be frequent to avoid regular concentration of foot traffic to the same spot, use being made of the outer regions of the greens as far as possible, although keeping towards the front in very wet spells.

## **FROSTY CONDITIONS**

Damage caused by play during frosty weather falls into two main categories:

- When frozen, plant tissues are easily bruised by players' feet. Following a thaw, it is often possible to see brown footmarks for several weeks, particularly around hole sites. The greater the weight of play in hard frost, obviously the greater becomes the extent of this damage. Affected areas remain thin for long periods, altering the trueness of the putting surface, and are more susceptible to disease in spring.
- Long-term damage is caused when play takes place after a sudden thaw. In these conditions the top layer of thatch and soil becomes soft, whilst the underlying soil remains frozen. Root damage occurs from the shearing action as players' feet move the soft, unfrozen surface across the frozen sub-surface. This disrupts putting surfaces and creates weak areas that may not recover before the height of the competition season.

## **TEMPORARY GREENS**

The best way to overcome these problems is to follow a management programme for greens that develops excellent drainage and firm, dry surfaces. However, even the best draining greens suffer from surface water retention and frost from time to time and the availability of good quality temporary greens will help protect the main surfaces when they might be adversely affected by continued play. If prepared well in advance of possible need, temporary greens can provide an acceptable alternative to damaging the main surfaces or having to close the golf course altogether. Mow out separate temporary greens of good quality and reasonable size (perhaps 100 m<sup>2</sup>) well clear of the major putting surfaces. Many clubs do not wish to go to this trouble and put temporary holes on the approach, but damage may still be caused when retrieving balls which go through on to the actual green.

Such temporary surfaces can also be brought into use when major work programmes are being undertaken on the main putting greens, resulting in less disruption and a more rapid accomplishment of the work, in far safer working conditions.

## **DECIDING WHETHER THE MAIN GREENS ARE FIT FOR PLAY**

This is a vital aspect to consider and one that should be noted in the Course Management Policy Document. There must be a clear pecking order of responsibility for closing the main greens. The Course Manager should be the primary arbiter, making a sensible series of inspections through the day. Other club officials should not be allowed to change the decision. The decision-making process should be clear and consistent. Allowing play on overly wet or frozen greens early in the winter sets a dangerous precedent and should be avoided. Every effort should be made to keep green closure to an absolute minimum. Do not automatically close all 18 greens if the first few inspected are unfit. Whenever possible a selection of greens should be kept open, i.e. the naturally drier ones or those less susceptible to frost, provided these are deemed fit for use.