

Course Consulting Service ON-SITE VISIT REPORT



ALPINE LAKE GOLF CLUB Terra Alta, West Virginia

Visit Date: May 4, 2015

Present: Chester Fitchett, Superintendent
Freddie Harrison, General Manager
Chris Zimpo, Green Committee Chairman
Lorraine Hart, Golf Committee Secretary / Treasurer
Elliott L. Dowling, Agronomist, Northeast Region

United States Golf Association

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USGA Green Section Mission: The USGA Green Section develops and disseminates sustainable management practices that produce better playing conditions for better golf.

Overall, I found the golf course conditioning of Alpine Lake Golf Club to be relatively good. In fact, I commented a few times during our visit that the overall conditions, as they were on the day of our visit, do not necessarily reflect the total amount of available resources given to the golf course. In other words, Mr. Fitchett is providing a much better golf course than his budget would suggest is possible.

To that end, we spent a majority of time discussing ways to reduce inputs and more importantly, take those reductions and reallocate them to other, more important areas of the golf course such as greens and tree removal. Mr. Zimpo indicated that Alpine Lake Golf Club initiated the maintenance-down-the-middle mentality last season. Rightfully so, focusing all available resources on the primary playing surfaces (tees, fairways and greens) and, when possible, the rough is the proper way to prioritize areas for improvement.

In September 2014, Alpine Lake Golf Club began transitioning areas of the rough that they feel are mainly out-of-play for the majority of golfers, regardless of skill level, to a naturalized area. Simply put, these areas will grow to full maturity with little maintenance rather than the heavily managed 2.5 inch height of cut found in the primary rough. Timing of mowing and preemergence herbicide controls were topics of conversation that I will have more on later in the following report.

Ultimately, the goal for Alpine Lake Golf Club moving forward is to identify areas that either can receive less maintenance or, in some areas, may need to receive increased maintenance to promote turfgrass health and improve playability. I hope that with continued reductions in overall maintenance, resources reallocation will occur in important areas like core aeration and tree removal.

Lastly, we examined the current equipment fleet and I made recommendations regarding some short-term equipment requirements. Again, I will have more on this later in the report.

With these thoughts in mind, I offer the following report as a summary of the major topics of discussion during our visit.

GREENS

1. Aeration. Mr. Harrison indicated the number one complaint he receives regarding the playability of Alpine Lake Golf Club is green speed and firmness. Green speed is often a topic of conversation on many of my visits because the ideal speed is very subjective, each player has a bias based on skill level. To that end, with some modifications to the maintenance procedures at Alpine Lake Golf Club, moderate improvements to green speed and firmness are possible.

The most impactful procedure (for turf health, green speed and firmness) that we discussed was increasing the number of core aeration treatments from one to two per



Increased core aeration will remove a greater amount of organic material located in the upper 1/2 inch of the soil profile. Less organic material will improve water infiltration and playability, leading to a more reliable surface for longer during the summer months.

year. Currently, Mr. Fitchett performs core aeration once in the spring followed by deep tine aeration in the fall. Although deep tine aeration is a very beneficial procedure, it does nothing to reduce organic material thus; it has no effect on firmness.

If possible, perform core aeration in the fall with a minimum 1/2 inch inside diameter hollow coring tine followed by sand-topdressing to fill each of the channels to the surface. Diluting the thatch /organic material located in the upper 1/2 inch will allow for better water infiltration and improved firmness.

2. Expansions. Mr. Fitchett is in the process of expanding some of the green's surfaces by simply scalping down areas of the approach and/or surround that either used to be green or he feels is a suitable area for additional putting surface. My only recommendation as it relates to the expansions is to increase the frequency of sand-topdressing and nitrogen fertility applications. Dramatically reducing the height of cut of any playing surface adds increased stress therefore, they need increased inputs to regain strength.

Light, frequent applications of sand-topdressing will bury the crown of the plants, which is important to reduce the likelihood of mechanical damage severely affecting their health. Furthermore, sand-topdressing promotes vertical, upright growth, which is healthier for the plants and will ultimately provide a better playing surface that is more resilient during stressful weather periods and better able to withstand mechanical and player traffic.

Lastly, increase the frequency of applications of a readily available nitrogen source such as urea or ammonium sulfate. Ideally, the expansions would receive 1/10 to 1/8 pound once per week or every other week. If this is unachievable, do what you can to apply more fertility as often as possible. As I mentioned, reducing the height of cut places increased stress on the grass plants hence, additional fertility is required to ensure they are as healthy as possible before the onset of summer.

3. Collection Areas. We briefly discussed the installation of collection areas around select greens to improve aesthetic appeal and more importantly, provide additional shot options for everyone who plays. Successfully hitting the delicate touch-shot that is required just off the green is challenging for many players. Conversely, if the golf ball were to land on a shortly mowed collection area, it provides a greater degree of shot options for every player. Rather than having to hit a very difficult chip shot, players have the option to use any club in their bag that they feel comfortable using. Again, we spent very little time discussing this idea but I wanted to mention that I for one like the aesthetic appeal and more importantly, the improved playability of these areas.

ROUGH

1. Naturalized Areas. The recent adoption of the maintenance-down-the-middle mentality is going to pay dividends in the future for Alpine Lake Golf Club. As many of you know, the golf course covers an enormous acreage meaning many areas between holes are not in play. Maintaining these areas at primary rough height was a complete drain on the grounds' operational budget for almost zero impact on playability. Mr. Fitchett indicated during our visit that he estimates a near 30% reduction in labor and resources following the adoption of maintenance-down-the-middle. This reduction is significant and one that should please everyone involved. Consider this 30% not a true cost savings but rather the potential to reallocate resources to other, more important areas.

- a.) *Maintenance*. The question was asked during our visit, how should these areas be maintained moving forward? Continue to mow the areas each fall to limit weed development and help spread beneficial seeds. At that point, make an application of a preemergence herbicide like the one currently in inventory to control winter annual germination. Follow this with a subsequent application of the same material the following spring to protect against difficult to control weeds such as foxtail, thistle and crabgrass.

Over time, each application will have a cumulative effect and weed pressure



The contrast between primary rough and the newly established naturalized area is going to be great. Transitioning areas of the golf course that receive little, if any play to a natural state will reduce inputs, allowing them to be reallocated to other critical areas of the golf course.

will diminish. Having said that, weeds will always be a struggle and one that needs adequate weed controls each season, otherwise the potential for re-infestation increases. Over time, with aggressive control measures, the weed population will diminish and accordingly the potential for spring and fall applications of a preemergence herbicide may lessen.

- b.) *Number Five Hillside.* The one area where questions were raised regarding playability was the hillside on the right side of the Fifth fairway. Everyone on the visit indicated that this hill comes into play from various holes. Therefore, they felt allowing the area to grow naturally may increase player complaints regarding playability and lost balls. This is a good example of an area where managing it at a four inch height of cut will allow players to potentially find their ball and advance it. On the day of our visit, this hillside exhibited a four to five inch height of cut and after throwing three or four golf balls around the hill, I felt there were many opportunities to find the ball and advance it. Given its relatively steep slope, I have no doubt it has difficulty holding water and nutrients; therefore, I imagine it will continue to have a relatively thin

appearance as it did on the day of our visit.

TREES

As we drove through the golf course, I made mention of a few trees in particular that I would like to see removed to improve turfgrass health. Other than the few we examined, I made mention of the overall number of trees at Alpine Lake Golf Club and the need to begin selective removal in the near future. Specific areas like Number Two tee and Number Six green are areas that come to mind that would benefit from tree removal as soon as time and resources permit.

Both of these holes have trees in close proximity to the playing surfaces that have zero impact on playability and are negatively affecting turf health. Trees will always out-compete grass for available nutrients and water.

1. Number Six Green. Number Six green struggles because of a poor growing environment specifically, a lack of sunlight penetration. Mr. Fitchett believes the back portion of the Sixth green previously stretched back about an additional ten yards. Because of the numerous trees in close proximity to the Sixth green, reductions in size and grass variety occurred to reduce stress. Unfortunately, each season as the trees continue to grow taller and reduce sunlight penetration, size reductions continue..

I recommend removing one or two rows of trees from behind the Sixth green to promote sunlight penetration and potentially air movement across the green's surface. Potentially, the Sixth green could be expanded back to its original shape improving aesthetic appeal and adding additional hole locations on the back of the green.

2. Number Seven/Eighth Tee. Number Seven green suffers similar decline to Number Six due to a poor growing environment. Again, removing one or two rows of trees will greatly improve sunlight penetration, reducing stress on the

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Equipment Needs. There are some immediate equipment needs at Alpine Lake Golf Club to help Mr. Fitchett and his staff increase efficiency. Specifically, additional utility vehicles will allow more employees to spread out across the golf course increasing efficiency in overall travel time. As I mentioned in the introduction, Alpine Lake Golf Club is an expansive property and it takes a lot of time just to position people where needed. I would imagine in the course of an eight-hour day there is a significant amount of lost time by simply travelling from one area of the golf course to another because of the lack of maintenance equipment and the need to put as many people as possible in a cart.

More available carts means movement throughout the property is swifter and more efficient. Additionally, we discussed the possibility of trading unused pieces of equipment and acquiring attachments for your triplex greens mowers for increased

rolling.

Please, if nothing else, explore the possibility of increasing the equipment fleet, particularly utility carts. Simply put, having only two utility vehicles makes doing anything efficiently difficult.

2. Growth Regulators. Mr. Fitchett indicated he did not use growth regulators on any of the playing surfaces. Applying growth-regulating products is common on most of the golf courses we visit. Controlling the growth of the plants actually improves turfgrass health, potentially reduces disease infestations and more importantly may have implications to the maintenance procedures. If Mr. Fitchett could slow the growth of the fairways, especially in spring and fall when weather is favorable for cool season growth, he could potentially reduce the number of mowings per week.

3. Staff Size / Professional Staff. We also examined the total staff size specifically, the number of qualified professional employees on the grounds staff. Currently, Mr. Fitchett has seven employees, which he primarily uses to mow grass. Although the majority of any maintenance staff employee's time is spent cutting grass, Mr. Fitchett does not have an adequate number of employees for the total acreage of Alpine Lake Golf Club. An additional one or two staff members would be a tremendous benefit to Mr. Fitchett and the players of Alpine Lake Golf Club.

Furthermore, I encourage you to continue discussions regarding securing a seasonal intern or Assistant Superintendent. Simply put, Mr. Fitchett's time is stretched so thin because of the lack of workers that it is difficult for him to be everywhere at once. One additional set of qualified eyes to manage the property would help reduce the burden placed on Mr. Fitchett's time.

CONCLUSION

This concludes my summary of the major points of discussion during my visit and tour of your golf course. If any questions arise concerning this visit, my report or any other area, please feel free to call our office. We are here to help.

Sincerely,



Elliott L. Dowling, Agronomist
Green Section, Northeast Region

ELD: mf

cc: Chris Zimpo