

Damned If You Do, But Not If You Don't

Sometimes the hardest lesson to learn is to do nothing at all.

BY BOB VAVREK

We all go through life learning how to do things. You could say we are programmed for action. As a turf manager, you make decisions and take action every day. You hire, you fire, and you promote personnel. If the grass grows, you cut it. When a sprinkler leaks, you fix it. When grass wilts, you water it. A good superintendent spends a great deal of time learning how and when to do the right things on the golf course in a timely and efficient manner. However, I would argue that great superintendents have an additional skill that is far more difficult to learn. The way I see it, great superintendents have a knack for knowing when to do nothing.

There are times when the best course of action is to not take any action at all. Can you choose the lesser of two evils? Do you have the moxy to not run fairway sprinklers the night after a brutally hot afternoon because your experience tells you that a *Pythium* outbreak is likely to occur and any water applied will only spark and spread the disease? Are you willing to lose some turf to wilt and then defend your lack of action?

There are plenty of other examples of when doing nothing is the best approach, and it is not a skill you are likely to learn in Turfgrass 101. For example, you wouldn't mow soft greens after last night's rain. But what if it is Men's Day? Will the greens be firm enough to mow by noon? You don't brush topdressing into the green after a stretch of hot, stressful weather. But what if it is a cool afternoon and the greens are bumpy? You don't remove ice from greens when a cold snap is predicted, even though every course around you has fired up snow blowers. But what if ice has been present on your *Poa annua* greens for 50 days? Will turf die if you don't, or will turf die if you do? The correct action is rarely



It's going to be a busy Men's Day this afternoon. How long would you wait before mowing a waterlogged green? It is a difficult concept for turf managers to learn, but sometimes doing nothing is the correct course of action.

black or white and more like shades of gray.

Doing nothing is a difficult choice to make because someone with limited understanding of the situation may associate a lack of decisive action with being lazy or incompetent. Conventional wisdom would say that there will be fewer repercussions if something goes awry because you took action versus taking no action. Imagine trying to explain to an owner or club president why you need to close a green and play a temporary because you didn't do something? That's a scary double whammy that can double your troubles. Fair or not, human nature leads us to be far more sympathetic to one's misfortune if one takes action, even if it's the wrong action.

Every turf manager needs to learn the intangible skill of when to leave well enough alone. Standing pat is hard to do when the mantra of "more is better" influences many decisions. For example, there is nothing quite like winterkill injury to putting greens that drives a superintendent to excess. The damaged greens at some facilities are spiked and seeded, slit-seeded, verticut and seeded, aerated and seeded, as well as fertilized three or four times before soil temperatures even approach

the 55° to 60°F threshold needed to initiate bentgrass seed germination. As soon as grass begins to sprout, the process is repeated just to ensure everything that can be done has been done, even at the cost of slowing the rate of recovery. No doubt, we are programmed to do something, even at times when doing less is actually doing more.

Lucky ones won't have to learn the hard way when not to do something. Perhaps as an intern or assistant superintendent, you will be fortunate enough to have a mentor whose experience becomes your experience. When you find yourself wondering why you were told not to do something you think you should, ask questions, don't argue, and listen. Listen and you may begin to understand one of the more difficult concepts of turf management to master: When to stop, when to back off, and when to wait and see. The key is to listen. To paraphrase an old cowboy proverb, "You can't learn a thing when you're talkin'."

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