2017 Annual Golf Course Review

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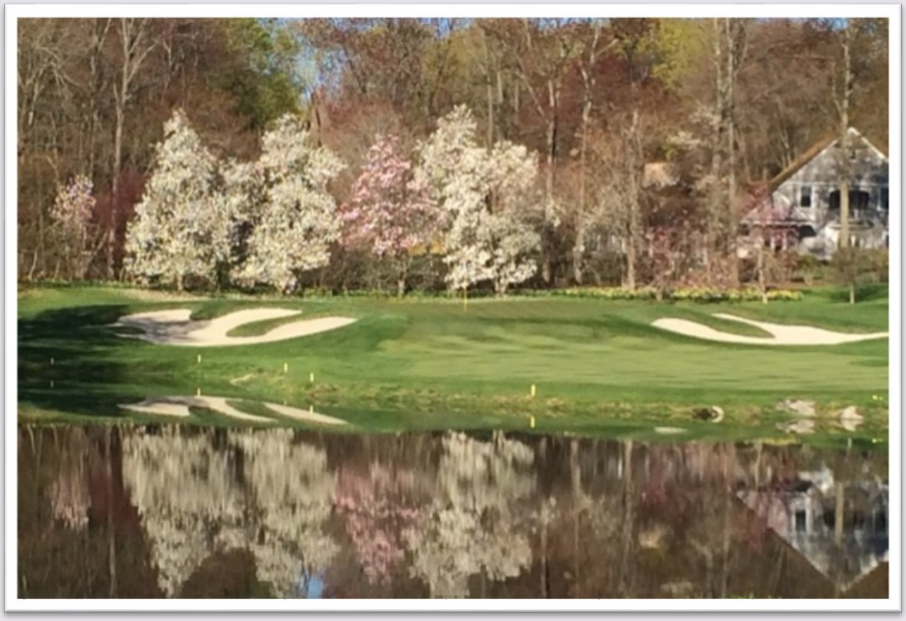
We couldn't ask for a better year of weather than 2016, with hardly a rainout for the entire season. All of our major events, including the Ladies Ivy League Championship, the Wyndham Cup and French American Challenge had excellent weather and course conditions with accolades for the Club all around. Another result of the dry golf season was a record number of rounds of 21,000, which is very busy by Stanwich standards, but as we have learned in the past, that figure can easily drop by a few thousand given a rainy one.

Some other noteworthy news, Golf Digest came out with their biennial listing of America's top 200 golf courses in late winter. Stanwich remains the #1 course in the state of Connecticut and gained 11 spots in the top 200 raising to the #150 spot - at least we are going in the right direction!
We had another excellent showing in the MGA's Arthur Weber Environmental leaders in golf competition, finishing as runner-up with recognition given at the annual MGA/ USGA educational meeting at Old Westbury Golf Club on Long Island last month.



It was an odd winter, with some bare ground in virtually every month allowing for plenty of winter golf. We also had March-like weather throughout February and vice versa, culminating with the blizzard in mid March. That storm and another early one in Colorado last fall, were instrumental in delaying our contractor from completing the capital projects we had planned for this fiscal year. Hopefully April will bring some dry weather so we can get those improvements behind us asap. Lastly, I'd like to say that the new addition to our family, our rescue dog Arnie, has turned out to be a terrific companion and the best Geese dog we have ever had! The coyote decoys we have been using for Geese control may soon become obsolete thanks to Arnie's tenacious pursuit.

The following pages represent some of the more salient points of discussion for the various areas of the course. We sincerely hope you enjoy the golf course this year!

Greens

The greens performed very well for last year's golf season in spite of some rather stressful weather from time to time, which demonstrated once again the benefits of having Bentgrass greens versus Poa annua (Annual Bluegrass). They are also superior in their winter hardiness and as expected have come through this year's stretch of cold snowy weather in great shape. Our 5 year lease for the mowers we use to cut greens is up this spring, so we will be starting out the season with a new set of John Deere cutting units which will have some updates and improvements to further enhance their performance and ultimately the quality of our putting greens.

As usual, after the last scheduled golf event last fall, we aerated and top dressed the greens with sand and just repeated that practice at the end of March. This program where we carry out our major cultural inputs at the bookends of the year, allows us to give you the greens unscathed for the entire golf season. The many other cultural practices we use during the year are not disruptive to putting quality. That biannual timing allows us to achieve our goal of giving you excellent greens everyday throughout the golf year. The heavy layer of sand applied after aeration at the end and beginning of the growing season, helps greatly to protect the crowns (growing point) of the plants from disease infection and damage from all types of wear imposed on the greens for the next 7 months. Furthermore, it helps to dilute the thatch layer at the surface and maintain adequate infiltration, which are very important factors in creating excellent playing conditions.

Last year's average green speed was 12'7" with a range of 11'10" - 13'8".
Our governing committees have decided that the optimum daily green speed for the Stanwich greens would be about 12'6". That level of ball roll distance allows for a reasonable putting challenge and avoids escalating green speeds that would create conditions that may be considered unfair.

We have a handful of greens (1,4,5,9,11) that become rather severe at higher speeds which reduces cupping area, slows down play and detracts from an enjoyable round at Stanwich. In time we hope to rebuild those greens beginning with #4 (perhaps this fall), which most players will agree, can be rather diabolical on many days. By putting a lid on the speed, we can adjust the aforementioned group and not have to keep adding to it, making the greens flatter all the time.

The number one challenge with our Bent greens is to stop the persistent encroachment of Annual Bluegrass, which if left unchecked, would eventually take over all the greens. We do a number of cultural things which help to discourage it such as imposing minimal surface disturbance (not pulling plugs, verticutting, grooming, etc) , keeping Nitrogen and water usage to a minimum, plugging out spots and using plant growth regulators (PGR's) and herbicides such as PoaCure. The combination of all of these inputs has served us well over the years in inhibiting the establishment of Annual Bluegrass. The PoaCure product, which we have used very successfully under an experimental use permit, is produced by a Korean company (Moghu) that has been trying to get EPA approval for usage in the U.S. for about 5 years now. It is not a highly toxic compound and is the best Poa annua control herbicide ever discovered. The latest report regarding it's status with the EPA is that they may have their registration approved in late 2018. Hopefully the new political environment at EPA will have a favorable influence on speeding up the registration of popular, safe, new products like PoaCure.

The second biggest challenge for us on greens and for most golf clubs across America, is the scuffing of golf shoes, which is actually a shoe problem, and not a turf problem. We do our best to grow scuff proof greens as much as possible by encouraging upright growth of the Bentgrass, however the most aggressive shoes still have a tendency to cause damage when players drag their feet. A number of the golf shoe companies are paying for studies at various universities (Cornell, Michigan, Iowa, etc.) to look at the wear created by their shoe cleats in an effort to design soles that will give adequate traction for the golfer and yet not damage the putting greens. The results of that research, coupled with the buying habits of the golfing public, will hopefully select out for shoe treads that won't scuff up our perfectly groomed putting surfaces. You can help by purchasing shoes with non aggressive spikes and of course, not scuffing your feet when walking on the greens.

Tees

Thanks to the purchase of new 22" John Deere greens mowers for the tees last year, we have been able to cut lower which has resulted in a better appearance and playability. As with the greens, we aerate the tees with solid tines, just punching in holes, and then fill them with a sand top dressing. The tees get three of those treatments during the year as well as a monthly topdressing. The quality of the turf on the tees is rarely a problem except on some tees which are too small for the amount of play they receive such as the white tees at #3 and #12. To remedy that situation, this spring we will expand both of those tees, enlarging them to about 750 sq.ft which is about double their current size. Another issue with a couple of our original blue tees is that they are not very level, which seems to be more pronounced as we cut the turf lower. The rear of the tee at #3 falls off dramatically in the rear left side and the tee at #6 is difficult to find a level lie, so they too will be rebuilt first thing this spring.

Our biggest project to tackle in April is to level the lesson tee located below the large practice tee and add a row of synthetic mats (Turf Hound) at the rear, providing 20 hitting bays. We have enlarged that tee as much as possible given the existing lay of the land, which will allow us to create a tee of about 10,000 sq.ft in size. It will be sodded with low mow Kentucky Bluegrass and opened for play shortly after completion. The new row of mats will come in handy during times when the K.Blue turf is dormant, during inclement weather and if the large practice tee needs a rest for whatever reason. The distance from the back of the lesson tee to the woods at the end of the range is about 250 yds, so long hitters may have to adjust accordingly to avoid launching balls into the trees

Fairways

As with greens, the lease on our fairway mowers has also matured, so we will start off the season with nice new updated and improved mowers. The ultimate goal in our fairway playability is to give you a green, firm surface that gives maximum bounce and roll. We try to be as stingy as possible with our irrigation and wait as long as we can after rainfalls before beginning to add more water. We also do a lot of hand watering to allow us to spot treat localized dry areas without turning on the sprinklers.

Our biggest challenge with fairways is drainage. Even though we have added many miles of drain pipe throughout the course, we still have plenty of areas where we can improve. In fact, this fall we plan to install a deep drainage line along the middle of #2 fairway that will help to lower the water table along that often saturated low area. Another project slated for the fall is to level the old gravel drains which have settled on fairways #3 and #11.

A new program which will be instituted for this season is the use of rollers on the fairways. Last fall we purchased two 14' wide Sisis rollers which can be pulled with our utility vehicles. Ongoing University research has shown that rolling fairways helps to remove dew, significantly reduces diseases such as Dollar Spot, controls some insects, decreases thatch levels and gives the turf a higher quality look overall. So on the days when we don't mow, we will roll the fairways. In fact they look like they have been just cut after they are rolled.

In an effort to improve on the turf quality of the fairways and increase their potential to withstand moisture stress, we have added a few products to their list of inputs. A new more effective wetting agent will be used to improve infiltration of water into the root zone and biostimulant products similar to the ones we use on the greens, which includes seaweed extracts and amino acids, will also be regularly applied to the fairways. The final ingredient in our arsenal of fairway health products is a plant growth regulator, which further improves drought tolerance as well as aids in the control of Annual Bluegrass.

Our annual cultural program for fairways includes an aeration in the spring where we pull cores and then drag them back into the turf and then in the late fall we use solid tines to just punch holes into the surface. These two important practices help to reduce thatch build up and maintain infiltration of moisture.

Bunkers

The bunkers have been vastly improved since the installation of the Better Billy Bunker liners and new sand 2 years ago. Last season we started a new method of raking the bunkers known as the " Australian Method" where we just rake the bottom floors and leave the banks alone except for smoothing any footprints as necessary. This approach to bunker maintenance allows the banks to remain firm, hopefully eliminating "fried egg" lies, so that when golf balls hit the banks they roll to the bottom leaving you a very playable level lie.

The only negative side effect to the Aussie method was that balls would get rolling so fast down the banks, that they would not stop in the bottom and roll up the rear bank, resulting in near impossible down hill lies. Fortunately there are only about a hand full of bunkers that would potentially result in that scenario. So our plan for the near future is to address those affected bunkers by removing the existing capes on the rear sides and leveling the roll out area, so that golf balls will come to rest with a level or up hill lie.

One other small bunker adjustment which we will make this spring, is at the left hand fairway bunker on the 6th hole where balls can stop directly behind a raised cape leaving you with no chance to reach the green, even though you have barely missed the fairway. We will lower and recontour that area of the bunker to give you a reasonable chance to hit the green in regulation.

Rough

Like most turf areas, our roughs are only as good as the irrigation they receive, whether it comes from our sprinklers or rainfall. Therefore during a dry summer like last year, much of our rough areas are going to go dormant and decrease in quality due to the lack of effective irrigation coverage beyond the borders of each fairway. We also sometimes have to turn off the sprinklers between the tees and fairways. Your can get a good visual of this phenomenon by looking at the latest Google Earth photo of Stanwich which was taken late last summer. It shows very clearly the effective coverage of our rough areas, which doesn't extend very far off the fairways' edge. We can help out our situation somewhat by drilling more wells and adding to our supply of available water to use during very dry summers.

The first step in developing more irrigation for us is to locate spots to drill new wells. So last fall we hired a "Dowser" to identify those exact locations where we would have the best chance to be successful. The ones she picked are both to the right of the 17th hole. We will test those 2 spots as soon as we can get a permit from the town of Greenwich to do the drilling. Due to the drought, they are not giving out any permits of that kind until reservoir conditions resume normal levels. Assuming we find the water, the next step would be to get a water diversion permit from the State of CT to use the new wells. We hope to generate another 100,000 gallons a day, which would bring our overall total to 350,000 gallons per day from all wells.

Our philosophy for height of cut for the rough (2") is to make it short enough so that you can find your ball quickly and have a reasonable chance to advance it to the next landing area. This approach to rough management helps to speed up play and increase the "fun factor " when playing at Stanwich.

Due to the lack or irrigation for much of our roughs, we have been overseeding the main corridors of each hole with Tall Fescue, which is a grass species that holds up well with limited amounts of water.

As usual, this fall when we aerate the roughs, we will drop in 6000 lbs of seed. Over many years now, with tens of thousands of pounds of seed going down, we have established a fair amount of Tall Fescue. However, the end result is that we also have other varieties of grass which have established themselves in that area such as Bentgrass and Annual Bluegrass. Those species do not blend well with the existing Tall Fescue and Kentucky Bluegrass, which results in a non uniform mottled look. Some herbicides can be used to remedy that situation, but the best result would be to re-sod a border around all fairways to give them the highest definition obtainable.

To keep the roughs in the main corridor of each hole healthy and free of turf pathogens, this year we have scheduled more fungicide applications using different, more effective products. One other new program for some of the rough areas out of play, will be to stop mowing locations comprised of native Fescues, which in their natural state, will grow up to a couple of feet high and extend a beautiful golden seed head. If everyone likes them, we'll add more of those areas, if not we can always resume mowing activities. Letting those areas grow native will also help to reduce mowing, saving valuable manhours, decreasing gasoline usage and providing habitat for indigenous animals and birds. The areas we have chosen for this test include the hill right of #2 tee, the left hill on #4, the wooded area between #7 green and #8 tee, the right of #18 tee, and the right bank across the brook at #16.

Trees

Each winter we evaluate all the trees on the property and do the necessary safety pruning and removals. We take down those individuals that are decaying and in decline, reducing turf quality due to shade, or impeding on the line of play. This year we removed a few small understory trees to the left of #1, which you will most likely not even notice; on #5 to the right of the tee shot area, we removed 5 swamp maples that were affecting play; to the right of #8 green we removed 3 red maples that were all in decline and inhibiting turf growth due to their prodigious surface roots and heavy shade; to the rear of #3 green we removed a few maples to allow some light into that dense grove of trees, again hoping to establish some turf in there.

Finally, to the left of the 10th tee area, we removed about 56 trees to help open up the view of the Long Island Sound from the new terrace and other viewing points at the rear of the clubhouse area. The remaining trees blocking the view are not on our property, but perhaps at some point in the future we will have an opportunity to remove some of those as well and recapture more of the magnificent view that existed in the early part of the 20th century when that area was all farmland. The views down into the woods created by the removal activities will disappear as the existing under brush resumes growth later this spring.

Misc

Pond Banks:
About 10 years ago when we dredged all of the ponds to the North of the entrance road, we discovered that some of them consisted of a very poor, unstable clay soil. That material lacks the structure for adequate compaction to maintain the pond banks and in some areas they have eroded causing large chunks of sod to sloth off into the water. We can remedy this situation by using a type of organic bio log made of tree waste that can be laid along the ponds edge to keep the soil from falling into the water. The bio logs are then covered with topsoil and sodded. We will get an estimate to do that work this spring and begin repairs of those areas in the near future.

Golf Shop Path:
This winter we had a power outage at the Club that turned out to be the failure of a 75 year old direct burial cable that ran from the back drive, across the back of the clubhouse, around the first tee, and paralleled the front of the golf shop, ending at a transformer to the South of the bag drop. Fortunately we had just laid an extra conduit for the whole length of the rear of the clubhouse when installing the wiring for the solar panels on the maintenance building. So we used that pipe over to the first tee and then laid a new one for the length of the front of the golf shop. The resulting unsightly cut in the black top has destroyed the uniformity of the path in that area, so until we can make plans and appropriate funds to completely resurface the whole staging area, we have decided to paint it green with the Latexite sealant used on the cart paths out on the golf course. That work will take place in the spring as soon as temperatures become warm enough for adequate drying of the material.

Staffing:
During the winter months of each year, our department always loses a number of seasonal employees who find other work after they are laid off at the end of the year. This leaves us with the task of hiring a handful of new groundskeepers each spring to replace the fallout. With the local economy doing well, it is a challenge to find good, qualified help, especially at the wage rate offered for entry level positions of this kind. However, thanks to the excellent benefit package and working conditions offered by The Stanwich Club, we will nevertheless ultimately be successful in filling all of our staff vacancies at some point.

Just recently, Greg Rotter, one of our assistant superintendents, left Stanwich for a position with a local lawn spraying company. Greg was on our staff for 2 years and did an excellent job for us on the course. We wish him the best of luck and will miss his valuable input to our course management program.