

Case study

Lean and mean strategy works at Locust Hill

By MARK LESLIE

In 1995, Locust Hill Country Club in Pittsford, N.Y., was at a crossroads. Members had to make a choice: high maintenance vs. low maintenance; lush and plush vs. lean and mean.

By hiring Rick Slattery as superintendent, the club effectively made its decision. Slattery, a 1976 graduate of the University of Massachusetts' Stockbridge School of Agriculture, said in his job interview that his philosophy was "lean and mean." He argued that drier conditions are healthier conditions for turf.

"Typically, overwatered and overfertilized means an overabundance of *Poa annua*," he says.

Having proven his theory at the semi-private CenterPointe Country Club in Canandaigua, N.Y., Slattery immediately made his point after arriving at Locust Hill. He shut off fairway irrigation for more than a week... in the middle of a severe drought.

"I knew we were going to lose a lot of grass anyhow," he recalls. "I convinced the club to take measures to change the environment the turf was growing in - to more lean and conservative input - and start seeding in better grasses and allowing the *Poa* to either

die or adapt to the new program."

Two days after shutting down the water, Slattery's crew was aerifying and overseeding the fairways with bentgrass at triple the seeding rate. Seven to 10 days later, Slattery started conservative watering and received good germination.

"We've been doing it ever since," he says of his course, which plays host to the LPGA Tour's Wegmans Rochester tournament. LPGA Manager of Tournament Competition Sue Witters says Locust Hill is one of the best-conditioned courses on tour.

John Bartolotta, Locust Hill president and longtime green committee member, says members are happy with Slattery's methods.

"Our golf course was definitely heading in the wrong direction in terms of the condition until Rick Slattery arrived," he says. "He virtually went after the *Poa annua* and provided us with various growth regulators to enhance the fairways and add strength to the greens."

Slattery used highly ranked L-93 bentgrass on the greens but opted for the older Pennway for the fairways.

"I didn't care for real high quality with a real high price tag," Slattery says. "Seeding rate was more important to me than the type

of seed... I was getting seed for under \$4 a pound (instead of \$6 to \$10 some bentgrasses command). Instead of seeding one-half pound per 1,000 square feet for an expensive seed, I'd rather go with 1 1/2 pounds per thousand with a less-expensive seed."

Slattery shocked colleagues by purchasing uncertified seed but had his reasoning.

"I felt there was more *Poa annua* in the soil than in the seed bag. Plus, those *Poa* seeds won't do well with my maintenance program," he says.

Not only has Pennway proven a good turf, but the *Poa annua* has been reduced from 70 percent to about 20 percent on Locust Hills' fairways.

"It took three to four years of double-seeding before we noticed strong benefits - strong bentgrasses and strong bluegrasses around the fairways," Slattery says. "It takes that amount of time for bentgrass to mature."

While the golf course spent \$45,000 per year on fungicides before his arrival, Slattery now spends \$15,000 on fungicides, \$15,000 on seed and \$10,000 to \$12,000 on wetting agents, using them wall-to-wall.

For those who want to follow Slattery's footsteps, two factors rule: communication and commitment.



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Stick with the program

As part of his plan to drive out *Poa annua* and improve turf health at Locust Hill, Rick Slattery drastically cut back on watering. He also overseeded his fairways at triple the seeding rate.

"You have to be dedicated to the program," he said. "When the going gets tough, don't just rush to put water on the course."

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