

CHALKBOARD

TIPS FROM THE PROS

NORTHERN SUPERINTENDENT DEVELOPS DISEASE CONTROL STRATEGIES

Ron Wisniewski, superintendent at Flushing Valley Golf & Country Club in Flushing, MI, began formulating his own ideas about golf course management as a teenager. From the age of 15, when he mowed his first green, Wisniewski remembers that he always tried to think of ways to make the most out of every hour on the golf course.

Wisniewski's inquisitiveness motivated him to earn degrees in both turf management and nursery management at Michigan State University in East Lansing. Throughout college and following graduation, he worked on Michigan golf courses. Today, he puts his lifetime of experience to good use at Flushing Valley.

His techniques sometimes differ from those of other superintendents, however Wisniewski has maintained a healthy and popular course in an area with particularly challenging geographic characteristics. Flushing Valley was built 30 years ago in a low valley with heavy soils. High humidity and damp soil are constantly on Wisniewski's mind as he guards the health of his turf from season to season.

Like many other golf course superintendents in this region of the country, he finds that one of his most significant pest problems is pink snow mold (*Fusarium nivale*). Although the disease can infect all turf species, it is a particular threat to closely mowed turf. Conditions which bring on outbreaks of pink snow mold are cold, wet weather with temperatures ranging from 30 to 60 degrees F. Turf in poorly drained or shady areas is especially vulnerable.

To stay on top of the disease, Wisniewski adjusts management techniques according to the weather and follows a schedule of fungicide applications. "When it's 50 degrees outside and wet, the snow mold is active, so that's when you start beating it down," he says. "Once it gets a foothold, you are going to be seeing it in the spring.

"We stop mowing the greens after October 20. The weather is turning cold and damp. If snow mold is present, mowing can spread it around. The days are also shorter. The turf needs the extra leaf surface to carry out photosynthesis. Taller turf also



Pink snow mold on bentgrass.

has more 'body' going into the winter, and acts like a blanket."

However, management techniques alone can not control snow mold when conditions favor an outbreak. "I go out and spray all my greens and tees with 26019 (Chipco) at two ounces per 1,000 square feet on October 1," Wisniewski said.

Unlike many other superintendents, Wisniewski does not use covers during the winter to protect his greens. Instead, he topdresses them with sand throughout the year and applies about ten pounds of Milorganite per 1,000 square feet in January. The dark particles of fertilizer melt any ice on the greens and absorb heat from the sun during winter and spring.

"Once you commit to covers, your hands are tied," says Wisniewski. "You can't change your mind when the ground is frozen because you're not going to get the stakes out. The fertilizer only costs \$150 a year and I can check the turf without having to lift a cover."

Another area in which the superintendent differs from many of his peers is his refusal to collect clippings when mowing. "The guys who have been running into problems with patch diseases are the ones who have been catching clippings for the past six or seven years," he states. "They have taken the clippings away and never compensated for the organic matter that they've removed." He adds that disposal of clippings is increasingly complicated.

Wisniewski believes in using phosphorus and potassium nitrate relatively fre-

quently. He explains that heavy, poorly aerated soils can become a breeding ground for diseases such as pythium. The phosphorus makes the turf less vulnerable to patch diseases and potassium helps out against pythium, he finds. Wisniewski also schedules his fertilizer applications to prevent rapid top growth and to avoid thatch buildup.

"Two years ago, we were treating greens and tees for pythium, but not fairways," states Wisniewski. "That summer the heat index got up to 115 degrees in the first week of August and we lost about one-third of our fairway grass to pythium. Fortunately, we had shut the water off, because we knew it was hot and humid. So, the pythium did not hit the crown, but rather just ran across the leaf blades. We were 99 percent recovered by October."

Pythium can fool you, Wisniewski adds. First it appears like wilt. "If you think it's wilt and put water on it, you are just adding fuel to the fire," warns the superintendent.

To prevent a recurrence, he has placed the golf course on a preventative fungicide protection program. Greens, tees and fairways are treated on a regular basis by alternating between Chipco Aliette and Subdue.

"Sometimes instead of asking yourself what it will cost to do something," Wisniewski remarks, "you need to ask what the cost will be if you don't." After the pythium outbreak, he was able to convince the greens committee of the need to treat the fairways as well as greens and tees.