

Superintendent Fields Challenges At Ole Miss

Someone once described a specialist as "A person who knows more and more about less and less," but nothing could be less true for today's multi-talented turf managers. To excel, they require a breadth of horticultural knowledge that includes irrigation, drainage, topdressing, fertility, mowing, aeration, and other cultural practices.

In short, the modern successful turf manager must be part scientist, part artist, and part magician, with a "big picture" perspective. Gary Morris, superintendent of the golf course and athletic fields at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS, is all of these.

The 37-year-old Morris started his turf management career in 1973 at Inverrary Country Club in Fort Lauderdale, FL, as a laborer, and eventually moved up to foreman. He stayed there for almost four years before moving on to Coral Ridge Country Club, also in Fort Lauderdale, where he was the head spray technician.

After four years at Coral Ridge he went to PGA National in Palm Beach Gardens, FL, where he was supervisor of the Haig Course. He stayed with PGA for six years until he left to become superintendent of Emerald Hills Country Club in Hollywood Park, FL. He worked on the course for

almost four years before taking the position of head groundskeeper at Joe Robbie Stadium, home of the Miami Dolphins in Miami, FL.

"Working with the Dolphins was an unforgettable experience," Morris recalls. "So was working with Tom Mascaro [consultant to Joe Robbie Stadium and inventor of the Verti-Groove cultivator]. In my view, he's the backbone of the turf industry. He's a legend."

Morris left Joe Robbie Stadium after two years to take his current position at the University of Mississippi, affectionately labeled "Ole Miss."

"I was looking to get out of the big city," he explains. "When I came here to interview for the job, I sort of fell in love with Oxford and the history of Ole Miss."

"The experience I gained in Florida in golf course management and then working with athletic fields has helped me greatly at Ole Miss," Morris adds.

Morris accepted the position at the university in November of 1990. He is responsible for the Ole Miss Golf Club 18-hole golf course, Swayze Stadium baseball field, Hemingway Stadium football field, a track and its infield, and two practice fields. He directs a six-man golf course crew, a three-man football and track crew, and a two-man



Truckster pulls aerifier across golf greens during renovation.

baseball crew. What he found when he came to the school was less than perfect.

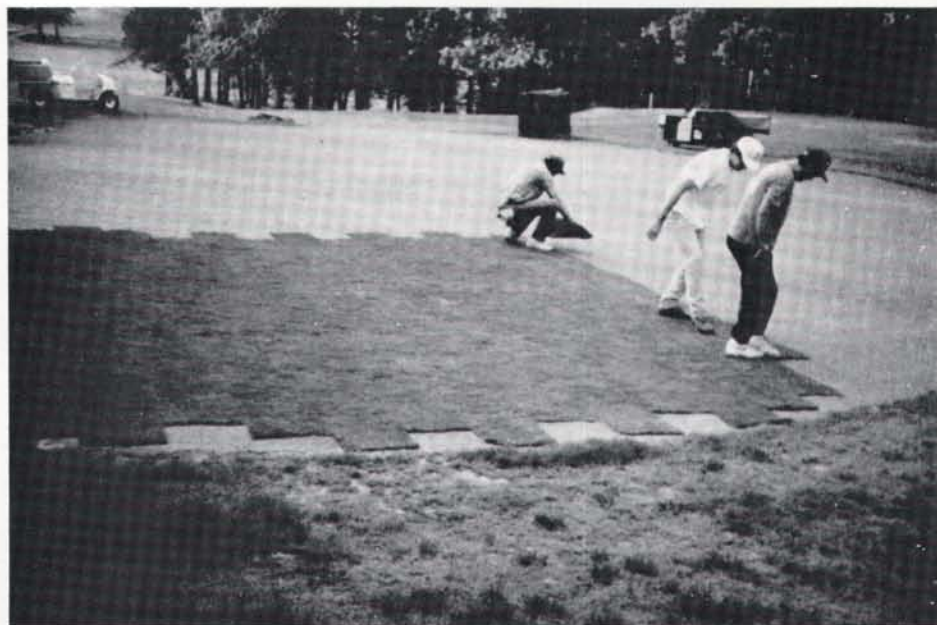
"When I arrived here I was greatly concerned with the turf—all the roots were in terrible shape," Morris explains. "The athletic fields were in terrible shape. The baseball field at Swayze Stadium wasn't as bad as the rest of the facilities, but I guess that's because it was a fairly new facility. The golf course needed a tremendous amount of work."

Morris had soil tests performed on the golf course and fields not long after he arrived, and spent the winter pondering what he would do to each turf area in the spring. That winter was one of the coldest experienced in the area in 20 years, and caused much of the grass to become dormant. Like other superintendents in the area, Morris reluctantly covered the greens on the university's course.

"It was kind of hard to plan, with our limited funds for the golf course, exactly what we would do come spring," Morris says. "We had to play a lot of it by ear."

Five greens were lost to winter kill that year. Most of them were in shaded areas. However, Morris recalls, that wasn't the worst of it.

"We lost all 18 of our tees because of low mowing late in the season last year that was done before I arrived," he explains. "That was kind of funny—I'd never seen anything like it before. You could see where



Resodding greens lost to winterkill.

the mower had cut off the very tops of the tees, and come spring they were all dead."

Both the greens and tees had to be rebuilt. Morris and his six-man crew faced several challenges.

First, the soil tests performed when Morris arrived revealed that 95 percent of the greens had a pH level of 5.5, and the superintendent wanted to raise the soil's pH. The greens had been constructed in the early 1970s on 12 inches of topsoil, over a clay hardpan, and had become extremely compacted. Drainage was inadequate. And then there was the problem of time: The golf season would be starting in a few months.

"We didn't have time to remove the soil profile, so we incorporated sand into it," Morris says. "We regraded and reshaped the greens and tees, installed drainage tile, and then sodded the greens with Tifdwarf and the tees with Tifway. I know a lot of people don't like the idea of sodding greens, but I had no choice. We had no time."

All the greens were Vertigrooved twice, in two different directions. Potash was incorporated into them, and regular cultivation and fertilization were implemented.

"I started out by liming the greens, and incorporated a lot of potash and magnesium," Morris explains. "In this area in the spring, you don't want to start out with a lot of high nitrogen fertilizers. For the season, I began with milorganite and moved up to a 3-15-30 fertilizer, alternating with a 0-20-20. Once in a while, to get some color, I would use some ammonium nitrate. Of course, in the fall I had to back off and went back to milorganite and potash."

According to Morris, the roots of the greens had grown down three to four inches within a few months. "By late June, we probably had the finest greens in northern Mississippi," he says.

Those greens that did survive the winter of 1990 will be renovated in the future. "I hope to rebuild another five greens next year, and eventually install new drainage and Tifdwarf for all our greens," Morris reveals.

While drainage, soil fertility, and other aspects of turf management are vital to both golf courses and athletic fields, Morris believes there are fundamental differences between golf course and sports field maintenance practices and goals.

"On sports fields, you're really trying to grow grass," he points out. "On golf courses, you have to pay attention to different surfaces and their conditions.



Hemingway Field the day after vertigrooving.

"The training I got in Florida [at Joe Robbie Stadium] and as a golf course superintendent is starting to come together, because here I have a golf course and athletic fields, and I like that," Morris continues. "I'm learning a lot about this area—it's a whole different ballgame owing grass here than it is in Florida. One of the things

I do in my daily practice is look underneath the grass, as well as on top of it. That's something I've always believed in, but Tom Mascaro helped reinforce it. I'll never forget that." Not content to focus solely on the "smaller" issue of greens rebuilding and renovation, Morris and his crew tackled the

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Slices removed by Verti-Groove on Hemingway Stadium.

Ole Miss

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larger issue of course irrigation. Originally, the course at Ole Miss had no fairway irrigation, and a manual system for greens and tees. Morris envisioned something more. "So I trained my superiors and told them exactly what we needed," he jokes.

A complete automatic irrigation system has been installed. Morris credits Robin Shores of Liberty Pipe, which supplied all the products required, including a Links Master Control System from Rain Bird, and contractors Scott Cross and Lanny Shackelford, for much of the project's success. Morris recalls few problems during installation.

"We did run into some trouble near completion with elevation," he says. "The pump was at one end and we had more pressure than we wanted at the low end, so

we installed pressure relief valves. There was also a little trouble at the end of the season with rain. A lot of our ditch lines washed out."

The system will be fully operational for the 1991 golf tournament season. Of course, Morris has additional ideas for improving the course at Ole Miss.

"I feel like we can get this golf course to be one of the finest in Mississippi if we can come in and do some reshaping on the fairways, install some more drainage, widen some tees, and put in some fairway bunkers," he says. "This course has a lot of potential. It's just been neglected. It has a beautiful fairway layout."

Budget, as always, is a consideration, and Morris describes his golf course budget as "lower than average." He also hopes to boost it, but realizes that such increases come from donations by alumni, and often



Core samples from green shows difference in root depth after aerifying (right) and without aerifying (left).

take time.

"The football field budget is a little different, because football is a big attraction," Morris observes.

Although the golf course is the largest turf area at the university under his care, Morris is also dedicated to improving football and baseball fields, practice fields, and track infield. Two practice fields were actually rebuilt last spring.

"The football field had no root system, no fertilization program to speak of," Morris remembers. "It was neglected." As on the golf courses' greens and tees, Morris incorporated potash and began cultivation of the fields. "I do a lot of cultivation, simply because roots move through spaces in the soil," Morris says. "If you don't have spaces in the soil, roots won't move through it, no matter what you put on the grass."

The fertilizers used on the fields are the same as those used on the golf course. Morris says this enables him to buy various

One 18-hole golf course and five athletic fields translate into many long hours of hard work.

fertilizers in bulk, which saves money. He generally applies some type of fertilizer to the fields every week, except during the cold winter months. He matches fertilizers to what he believes the fields need.

The results have been dramatic, and Morris is justifiably proud of the athletic fields at Ole Miss.

"I would say our football field could match up with any in college, or even the pros," he says. "Our baseball stadium is probably one of the finest in the nation at the collegiate level."

One 18-hole golf course and five athletic fields translate into many long hours of hard work for the superintendent and his crews, but Morris, one of today's multi-talented turf managers, finds the challenge exhilarating. "We've got golf, baseball, football, track—we've got everything!" Morris exclaims. "I'm on the move so much that I'm never in one place very long. It keeps me pretty busy, but I sure am enjoying it."