

IS VERTICUTTING NECESSARY?

By

HENRY C BECHELET B.Sc. (Hons) MBPR, RIPTA

Turfgrass Agronomist

Not necessarily!

If you set the right balance it is perfectly possible to create high quality putting surfaces without it - or certainly without too much of it. The problem is that too much verticutting damages the finer grasses and it also impacts on the establishment of new seedlings. If you want to establish putting surfaces dominated by the finer grasses you have to ask yourself the question.... *Is my verticutting necessary?*

The keeper

There are 3 main types of vertical cutting. Grooming improves the quality of cut and sward texture, scarification removes material from the turf base and verticutting sits in-between. Its all a question of degree. The problem with verticutting is that it can be extremely damaging to the grass plant. The blade hacks into the crown rather than just clipping away at the leaves. Too much damage and too often can be devastating to a naturally slow growing plant.

The greenkeeper verticuts fine turf for a number of reasons:-

- **To lift lateral growth**
- **To thin out the sward**
- **To remove organic matter from the immediate turf base**
- **To improve putting speeds**

It helps in the preparation firm, fast, smooth and true surfaces on which to play. Annual meadow grass is a quick growing weed that does not *naturally* create good putting surfaces without intensive verticutting. This being the case, the desired surface qualities don't tend to last for long and so more and more routine verticutting (among other things) is required to retain them. This aggressive verticutting leads down into the spiral of annual meadow grass dominance and it is usually accelerated with the over use of fertiliser and irrigation inputs to sustain strong growth levels. Let us be honest, annual meadow grass greens need a lot of work to keep them right and it is that very work that prevents the establishment of better species. Routine verticutting is the keeper of the weed.

Think again

If you want to produce fine grass dominated greens for their more natural playing qualities you have to have their nature in mind. See the article "Changing The Nature of Your Greens" on www.stri.co.uk for a more detailed discussion on the nature of the fine turf species. To summarise, bents and fescues prefer quite a settled environment to flourish. Essentially, to establish a greater proportion of the finer bents and fescues within your greens you cannot rely on verticutting as a dominant surface preparation treatment. For the finer grasses to come in and flourish you will have to ease up on the aggression. Remember that fine grass dominated greens are better for longer in the year and they are ultimately easier to maintain. Fine grass dominated putting surfaces will certainly be more reliable than annual meadow-grass greens, which will surely let you down again and again no matter how good a greenkeeper you think you are.

Just because

Of course it is completely possible to prepare high quality putting surfaces without routine verticutting. Cut back your fertiliser and irrigation inputs to regulate growth and reduce the need for routine verticutting treatments. Maintain a dense and upright sward texture with light grooming, brushing and top dressing to provide smooth and true surfaces on which to play. Top dress and roll rather than scalping down to deliver speed. It really doesn't take a genius to create high quality putting surfaces without verticutting.

But with a more settled environment the finer grasses will stand a better chance of taking hold. Just because you have super efficient verticut units doesn't mean you have to use them too regularly.

Back to tradition

Good traditional greenkeeping is simple and it works. Aim to set up the surfaces in spring and then just let them tick-over during the growing season rather than being *at them* all the time. Curb your controlling instincts and allow a more settled environment to develop. Commit to overseeding properly and manage the establishment with care. Exert controlled stress when you can to pressurise the annual meadow-grass when you know that the finer grasses will be able to take advantage. Do all the things you know how to do already. Shame the cynics with sound principles.

GET REAL

Don't get me wrong, verticutting is a useful tool but it should be used but only when needed and not as a matter of routine. Remember, the skill of greenkeeping is all in timing and degree. Verticut as necessary but please appreciate the harm that it can do. The finer grasses really don't like too much rough treatment. Ask yourself a question...is my verticutting really necessary? If it is, then you might be better off asking yourself a few more questions.

See the article Do Not Disturb by Richard Windows on www.stri.co.uk for the definitive answer on this subject.

Henry Bechelet is an STRI Turfgrass Agronomist covering Eastern England. Henry and the rest of the team may be contacted on 01274 565131, email; info@stri.co.uk or visit our website <http://www.stri.co.uk/>

