*A different visual*

# Instinct vs. Insight

## HOW DATA COLLECTION ENHANCES THE ART OF TURFGRASS MANAGEMENT

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I recently had a conversation with a superintendent – a self-proclaimed purist – who summed up his skepticism about data collection in a way that stuck with me:

"Too much data takes the feel out of growing grass. Data is like a swing aid—it gets in your head, screws with your gut, and makes you chase numbers instead of playing conditions and healthy turf."

I couldn't help but picture the scene from Tin Cup—Roy McAvoy in his Winnebago, strapping on every training gadget imaginable, lost and searching for an answer. And honestly, I got it. It was only a moment ago that I was that same guy. It was all about the feels and the smells and the art of greenkeeping as an instinct that grows from within and evolves over time. Something that is refined over years of experience, trial and error, and more than a few humbling moments. You can't learn that from a textbook, chart, or spreadsheet. Data collection, what a load of rubbish.

The times they are a-changin', though. The conversation around golf course data collection has evolved. I've covered the 'how-to' before—now it's time to highlight those putting it to work. You see, plenty of turfgrass managers are finding ways to use data without losing their feel—they're letting it complement their instincts, not override them.

In 2022, Golf Course and Property Manager Ian McQueen and his team had St. George's G&CC in optimal condition to host the RBC Canadian Open. "Firmness, moisture content, and green speed were exactly where we thought the greens would perform their best," says McQueen. "These conditions were produced by pre-planned agronomic and cultural programs that allowed us to achieve ideal putting surfaces for tournament play. What we have realized over the last two seasons is that we can produce better, more consistent putting surfaces for the entire season through daily data collection methods. This data helps to guide adjustments, ensuring predictable, repeatable conditions for our members and guests every day."

For Andre Aymar, Superintendent at Lambton G&CC, day-to-day consistency of the surfaces is key. "When looking at the entire process, it doesn't add a lot of time to daily tasks, and it's been invaluable in helping us understand how our surfaces perform from one day to the next."

"Clipping volume has been the data point we have focused on the most," says McQueen. "There's a direct correlation to wear management, organic matter management, and trueness of the surfaces over the course of the season. It has also allowed us to identify any inconsistencies in mower setup. Operators are now aware of what to expect from the surfaces they mow daily, and we can ensure we are getting the best quality of cut from mower to mower." Newly appointed Golf Course Superintendent at The Thornhill Club, Cory O'Neil, echoes this, adding that it has allowed him to time nitrogen and PGR applications more precisely, giving him the ability to maintain the desired growth rate and ideal green speeds. "Collecting and recording clipping volume takes an additional 30 seconds per green, and there is no reason not to do it when the data over time has proven to be vital to our operation."

Tracking clipping volume isn't the only way data is reshaping agronomic programs. "Being dialed into the daily performance metrics has also allowed us to see how different practices like top dressing, aerification, irrigation, and nutrient application affect these numbers. It can change the way you look at things," says O'Neil. Aymar concurs, adding that tracking key metrics like green speed, firmness, trueness, and smoothness of the surfaces at Lambton has helped fine-

*A handful of insight*

tune the operation. "Without a doubt, data collection has been very beneficial for us to better understand our surfaces. Ultimately, a lot of times the data supports what we already know, and other times it has allowed us to adjust our practices to achieve the desired playability. It has also been very effective as a communication tool when reporting back to upper management or club governance." McQueen also stresses the value of the data when it comes to presenting information to Greens Committees. "We use the data to create graphs that illustrate our target goals compared to actual measurements. Showing members a visual representation of moisture levels compared to firmness, overlaid on rain events, for example, is a great way to explain why the greens were softer at certain times of the year. It's a simple way to translate agronomic realities into something that may be more relatable to club leadership."

"Data collection is often perceived to be overwhelming or something that we don't have the added time for," says O'Neil. "It will be an important tool in my first year as a superintendent at a new property." As Aymar points out, the benefits far outweigh the effort. "In my experience with data collection, I've seen enough benefits to warrant the time doing it. Those benefits may vary from manager to manager and course to course, and that's the beauty of it. Just start small and see how it can help you." McQueen emphasizes the impact on daily decision-making. "By collecting this information we can manage the turf precisely, controlling growth and improving playing surfaces without going backwards. This has allowed us to minimize disruption on the greens during the peak season, providing the membership and guests with the best conditions possible."

Here's the takeaway—use data as a tool, not a crutch. The numbers don't replace the feel; they refine it. They help us understand trends, cause and effect, and how the turf responds over time. They provide context for what we're already seeing and feeling. Data just puts those observations into measurable terms, making it easier to track changes, diagnose problems, and make adjustments before small issues become big ones. It's about giving yourself more information to work with.

In the words of Tin Cup, "Some of this sh*t might actually work, y'know... I mean, I think there's something to this hat with the golf ball pendulum thing... may be on to something here..." ■