

Makin' Hay

The use of common farm implements to manage natural roughs.

BY BOB VAVREK

The trend at many courses is to reduce the acreage of costly, manicured roughs and incorporate more low-maintenance turf into the layout. Consequently, areas of unmowed turf, native grasses, and wildflowers are becoming a common sight in more golf course out-of-play areas as golfers begin to appreciate this transition. The course with vast expanses of wall-to-wall manicured turf is becoming an endangered species in many areas of the upper Midwest.

The benefits of reducing the amount of high-maintenance turf have been well documented over the past ten years as an increasing number of golf courses have become participants in the popular Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. Less mowed rough ultimately reduces maintenance costs, and the natural areas can provide excellent habitat for wildlife. However, natural roughs still require annual maintenance to prevent uncontrolled weed growth and the undesirable accumulation of excess plant debris that can detract from the overall appearance of the course.

The most common method of maintaining a consistent natural rough is to scalp down the site during the late fall or early winter and then collect the excess plant material. Collecting the clumps of debris is a time-consuming, labor-intensive operation, particularly in expansive roughs. A cool burn can be an effective way to manage prairie grasses and some species of unmowed cultivated turf, but local ordinances often restrict or prohibit burning operations. The topic of this turf tip is a fast, simple way to mow and clean the

debris from natural areas using common farm implements.

First, mow the site during late fall using a bush hog-type unit, flail mower, or rotary mower, depending on the composition of plant material found in the native area. Clean, sparse grasses can be scalped down with a common rotary unit, but sites with woody plant material, saplings, or extremely dense grass will require more heavy-duty mowing equipment.

The next critical step is to windrow the plant debris to facilitate the bailing process. A Kuhn rake is ideal for this operation. The downpressure on the spinning tines can be increased to scarify the soil and thin out thick native grasses.

The final step is to use a small New Holland bailer to collect and bail the plant debris. Bails can be rolled onto a small trailer and removed from the site. These bails typically contain too much

soil and other undesirable material to be useful as feed for livestock. Once the bulk of the plant debris is removed, the sites can be cleaned up with additional light rotary mowing operations, if necessary. Clean, scalped sites will produce a consistent crop of relatively uniform turf the following season and facilitate the application of pre-emergence or post-emergence herbicides, if needed, the following spring.

The cost of a common bush hog-type unit or flail mower with enough muscle for scalping down dense roughs is approximately \$6,000. A Kuhn rake costs about \$4,000, and the smallest New Holland bailer costs about \$14,000. Bailers and rakes can often be rented in many rural areas.

Mike Morris, CGCS at Crystal Downs Country Club (Frankfort, Mich.) has used this technique with success for several years. Rick Grunch, superintendent at the Belvedere Golf Club (Charlevoix, Mich.), using slightly different equipment, has performed similar and equally successful operations. Both courses provide golfers expansive areas of pristine roughs each season by *makin' hay*.

BOB VAVREK can be found makin' hay while the sun shines at golf courses throughout Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.



Removing dense clumps of plant debris from mowed sites is a time-consuming operation unless specialized equipment is used. A Kuhn rake will windrow plant debris and the tines will further thin out dense stands of native grasses.