

Pender groundskeeper brings precision to the green

Sophie Woodrooffe

Grass clippings have much to teach those who pay attention. Jason Haines knows. The superintendent of the Pender Harbour Golf Club figured it out after the financial crisis hit in 2008, when budget constraints were tighter, and when social media began to flourish.

"Before I was on social media, it was pretty boring. I was doing the same old thing, without much thought," Haines said. Today, he has nearly 5,000 Twitter followers, and thanks to his popular blog is invited to speak at golf shows in countries such as Iceland, Ireland and the United States. This weekend, the 32-year-old will be heading to Texas, where he will speak at the Golf Industry Show, the world's largest golf course and facility management event.

Haines' status as a sought-after groundskeeping expert comes from what he calls "precision turf grass management," a style of managing golf courses that is informed by data collection and focused on waste reduction and sustainability.

"Jay is definitely on the forefront of it," said Nathan Wade, greens superintendent from the Sunshine Coast Golf Club, which has adopted similar practices.

"We've really just simplified, asked a question: where is there waste? How can we reduce this waste? Where are we guessing and how can we guess less?" Haines said.

This approach has reduced the amount of fertilizer the club uses by 80 per cent and has led to a decrease in the amount of excess organic matter on the course, he said.

"We've had better, firmer, drier [soil], less weeds and disease," said Haines. And this, in turn, has reduced the need for herbicides and pesticides. "It's only when things get out of control, which is rare, only a few times a year, that we do require corrective action."

Instead of pesticides, Haines has adopted a method of rolling grass to smooth it out rather than mowing it, a technique inspired by research conducted by horticulturalists from Oregon State University, who published findings that discovered rolling grass rather than cutting it prevents certain diseases from spreading.

"When we mow the grass, we essentially spread the disease around, and disease is worse generally in the wintertime, when we don't really need to be mowing the grass as much as we do," Haines said.

Haines said he has received some pushback on his methods, but that overall the industry has welcomed his approach. It has also been good for the Pender Harbour Golf Club's bottom line. Because Haines consistently goes under budget, Tufford said the club has been able to make a new hire.

"The quality is much better these days, even with the weather conditions," said Jamie Tufford, club president.

