

# Shreveport Country Club

## Bends Tradition

By Matthew Trulio



The 9th hole before bent. "The greens were perfect little circles of sand," says Brown.

**T**his is one of the old clubs here in the South, and the members do like to stick to their traditions," says superintendent Jim Brown from his office at Shreveport Country Club in Shreveport, LA.

"You know," he continues, chuckling a bit, "like on Saturdays when you always have fried chicken, black-eyed peas, rice, cornbread, and mustard greens."

The traditions of Shreveport Country Club reach back to 1909, the year it was established. At that time, it was located on what is now the Louisiana State Fairgrounds. In 1919, the club moved to its present location on the west side of the inner city. From the 1940s through the early 1960s, a number of prestigious state amateur golf championships, and several invitational pro events, were held there.

"In the late '60s, Shreveport turned more toward its members," Brown explains. "It adopted more of a traditional country club atmosphere."

Late last year, however, Shreveport broke from tradition when it chose bentgrass, which is arguably *the* finest putting surface, instead of bermudagrass for its newly reconstructed greens.

"Everybody wants to play on bentgrass!" Brown enthuses.

Like growing bent, a cool-season grass, in the South, breaking tradition is never easy. At Shreveport, it took the members' desire and money, the word of a professional golfer, an excellent bentgrass seed variety, a seed swap, a little competition from another club, and one determined superintendent.

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The 9th hole today. Note cooling fan in the right hand corner.

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### The Road To Bent

When Brown, 41, graduated from Stephen F. Austin College in Nacadoches, TX, with a bachelor's degree in horticulture, he didn't see himself as a golf course superintendent. During college, he had specialized in asexual propagation of ferns and after graduation he worked for a wholesaler of the 77-millimeter variety. He later moved to Tyler, TX, to establish fern houses for the company, but his fern propagation plans hit a snag.

"They wanted me to handle some chemicals that I didn't want to handle, so I left," recalls Brown. "The local county attorney was building a golf course. He'd already hired someone to take care of it, but he put me in touch with someone who was looking for a superintendent."

By the time Brown became superintendent at Shreveport Country Club in 1990 he had been one in Texas for 15 years. He was the superintendent at Troup Country Club in Troup, Meadowbrook Country Club in Palestine, and Emerald Bay Club in Bullard. The position at Shreveport came up at the same time Brown had decided to resign from Emerald Bay and work full-time in a tree maintenance company he had established as a sideline during the years. He had already trained his replacement at Emerald Bay.

When Richard Flemming, a member of Shreveport Country Club and owner of Flemming Irrigation, which installs irrigation systems on golf courses around the country, heard that Brown was available, he persuaded him to apply for the job at Shreveport. The two had worked together before.

"Richard was instrumental in my coming here," Brown reveals. "Actually, the architect had called me four years ago about being their superintendent, but they wanted someone who could play golf and function with the members and I wasn't really interested in that."

This time, however, he was interested. He interviewed and was offered the job.

"When I came for my interview, the greens were perfect little circles of sand," Brown remembers. "It looked like someone had taken Roundup and sprayed it on the greens. And even when they turned on the sprinklers, they could never get the grass to green up on the fairways."

The challenge had him hooked. "Besides," he laughs, "I knew I could always go back to my tree care business."

### Starting Over

During the summer of 1990, Brown and his 22-man crew began what they thought would be root zone modification on all 18 greens, which had been rebuilt using Tifway 328 about four years ago. Once they began excavation, they discovered that the gravel layer under the greens varied from one inch to one foot.

"Drainage was basically non-existent," Brown explains. "What had happened was that greens had been built on top of greens. The exits to the drains had been sealed, and there was no way for the water to get out. It promoted a pretty unhealthy situation for grass growth."

On top of that, Brown recalls, the water used to irrigate the course, all nonpotable, was in bad shape. "The last superintendent here was investigating the water problem, and it turned out that we had high levels of sodium and bicarbonate in the water. Sodium was exchanging for potassium and it was disrupting the grass cells. We weren't getting quality water, so we couldn't grow quality grass.

"And every time we watered, it smelled like sewage," he adds.

The superintendent and crew attacked the water quality problem and greens reconstruction simultaneously. To solve the water problem, they worked with Jim Montgomery, a chemist with Greensmith, a fertilizer production and consulting firm in Dallas, and Hammonds Technical Services, a Houston-based company which specializes in injector pumps and systems used in the petroleum industry. Together, they created an injection system for the course.

"We inject sulphuric urea, which also acts as a wetting agent, and acid fertilizer, so that we're also fertilizing whenever we're injecting," explains Brown. "An impeller in the system creates suction, so that whenever you have irrigation flow, you have injection."

All of the greens, some of them sunken, were rebuilt to USGA standards. "We went strictly USGA—with herringbone, gravel, and choke layer," Brown explains. "The 12-inch top layer is 85 percent sand and 15 percent rice hulls."

Reconstructing the greens, he says, took plenty of effort, 12 hours a day for a few months, but the process was more or less uneventful. The idea of bentgrass greens was welcomed by the club, which was feeling the heat from Southern Trace, a relatively new club in Shreveport with bentgrass greens, according to Brown.

"I think we actually lost a few members

to them," he says. "Bruce Hospes [Southern Trace superintendent] does a great job with the bentgrass there. I think we wanted to keep up."

Getting approval to use the specific bentgrass seed he wanted—SR 1020 from Seed Research of Oregon—took a lot of lobbying and a little bit of luck, Brown reveals. "I guess I butted heads with just about everyone," he admits.

### Overcoming Obstacles

Like a growing number of superintendents in the South, Brown has a particular, if not vested, interest in bentgrass and his ability to grow it. According to Brown and others, superintendents who can successfully maintain bentgrass in the South often command higher salaries than those who can't. The demand for bentgrass greens in the region, and the short-but-growing supply of those who can keep them alive in the summer (when 100-degree, 90-percent humidity weeks are common) has created a relatively new market for savvy superintendents with bentgrass know-how.

Brown had stayed abreast of bentgrass research and improvements for the South through the North Texas Superintendents Association, the Texas Turfgrass Association, and regular attendance at Texas A & M University's summer trials. He also tried to keep up with the latest scientific literature on the subject. Never one to shy away from a challenge, he was confident he could produce and care for fine bentgrass greens at Shreveport.

"The greens were going to be finished in September, and the golf course architect on the job wanted to plant dormant bermuda and overseed with bentgrass for winter play," Brown recalls. "He said the bermuda would come up like a champ in the spring, but I said it wouldn't work. I've never seen that done successfully. When they asked me what I'd do I said, 'Well, as long as we're finishing up this late, we may as well just plant bentgrass, because there are a lot of varieties coming out that are adapted to this area.' To my way of thinking, I'd rather seed than sprig anyway. And if for some reason it didn't work, we could always go back and plant bermuda."

The club management agreed, yet it had reservations about Brown's choice of seed.

"They were kind of hesitant about SR 1020," he recalls. "Nobody knew anything about it. The golf course architect said he didn't want to put his name on a course with some new seed variety, even though I tried to tell them how long SR 1020 had been around."

"Things finally got turned around when Hal Sutton, who plays here from time to time, told the board that Ben Crenshaw used it on one of his courses, and said that it was the best bentgrass for the area. Once they heard that, they were all for it."

One hurdle still remained. The golf course construction contractor had already purchased another variety of bentgrass seed. Seed Research worked with Brown, who needed approximately 20 25-lb. bags of their product, and swapped him seed-for-seed. "I think they took a little bit of a loss on it, but they really wanted the SR 1020 to get in," says Brown.

They seeded the greens at two pounds per 1,000 square feet. They started seeding in September, finished in October, and started mowing the greens 17 days later. The course was reopened a few days before Thanksgiving.

#### Babysitting The Bent

"We watch the bentgrass greens a lot more than we would bermuda greens," says Brown. "Managing bent is a little more touchy than it is with bermuda."

It also takes more water. The course is irrigated, through "an old system that's falling apart," says Brown, to the tune of 1/2-million gallons per night. Much of that

water is devoted to less-than-one-year-old greens (they haven't even been aerated yet) in addition to the syringing they receive three times each day.

In addition, the Shreveport area received a approximately 60 inches of rain from February through April this year, and the humidity was high. Much to Brown's delight, the only problem the bentgrass developed was algae, which he took care of by spraying twice with an algicide. In fact, he says, he's only had to spray six times since the greens were installed.

"A lot of people managing bent in the South have a pretty big spray program, but we don't," Brown points out. "We don't have a preventative spray program—it's strictly curative. The good thing about being here in the transition zone is that we're familiar with most of the diseases which could affect bentgrass."

To cut the bentgrass greens and the rest of the course, Shreveport invested nearly \$175,000 in mowing equipment. After much consideration, Brown decided to buy all Jacobsen mowers. The greens are cut at 1/4 inch, every other day, with walk-behind greensmowers. During tournaments, the greens are mowed daily.

"Bermuda greens are usually cut at 5/32 inch, but we cut the bent a little higher because at this time of year you're just trying to keep it alive," says Brown.

The bermuda fairways are mowed with Jacobsen LF 100 lightweight fairway mowers at 5/8 of an inch. Tri Kings are used to mow slopes and rough, which is cut at 1-1/2 inches. The tees, also bermuda, are cut with the greensmowers at 1/2 inch.

Not all of Shreveport's equipment is quite so conventional. "We have fans, designed by one of the members, to ventilate the greens," Brown reveals. "We try to keep air blowing over them to cool them down and blow away the noxious gases."

Brown's plans for Shreveport's future are both long and short range. During the coming year, he plans to upgrade the course's aging irrigation system to stand-alone satellites, and maybe "something central" a little farther down the road. As for tomorrow and the next day—and every day until the Louisiana summer surrenders to fall—he'll work to keep the greens alive.

Adds Brown, "You have to babysit the bentgrass quite a bit, but it's not as bad as I thought it was going to be. We're just coming into the really hot weather now. That should make for a good challenge."

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