



The racing schedule at Retama Park calls for 139 days of live racing per year with 17 weeks of thoroughbred racing and ten weeks of quarterhorse racing.

Bladerunner Farms provided rolls of zoysia sod for installation at Retama Park.

South Texas Racetrack Bets on Zoysia

By Kathy Smith

Traffic along Interstate 35 just north of San Antonio slows noticeably as it approaches Selma, Texas. Travelers still brake reflexively as they cross the city limits of the tiny burg which once held a considerable reputation as a hungry speed trap.

Today the Selma City Hall police station is the site of a roadside restaurant. Locals still pass through the town at a sedate 54 mph, but Selma is banking on making money in a new speed-related enterprise. Thoroughbred horse racing has come to Selma.

Retama Park, a Class One racing facility, already has boosted the economy with construction jobs, new staff, purchase of building materials and more. Open since the first week of April, the track is destined to bring long-term benefits in the form of an expanded horse-racing industry, which, in turn,

translates into enhanced opportunities for suppliers, growers, breeders, trainers and others.

The turf track is considered one of the most important elements of the facility. Racing on turf produces fewer injuries to horses, appeals more strongly to the public and generates more entries from breeders and trainers.

A new variety of turfgrass is being used for the first time in a racing setting at Retama Park. Bender Wells Clark Design, a firm devoted to urban design, landscape architecture and environmental graphic design, selected ZoyBoy, a recently developed form of zoysia-grass, for the turf track. After careful study zoysia was chosen over several other varieties of grass because it fulfilled all of the characteristics considered critical for the turf on the track. The ZoyBoy variety is fine-textured and deep-green in color. ZoyBoy grows vigorously, estab-

lishing itself quickly. ZoyBoy recovers easily from damage, divots, traffic and more, so the track designers expect that it will stand up to the thundering hooves of the horses.

Low Maintenance Turf

ZoyBoy is an excellent turfgrass for this part of South Texas, where summer temperatures stay in the high 90s, and rainfall is rare. Developed and grown by David Doguet of Bladerunner Farms in Poteet, TX, the grass requires less water, fertilizer, chemicals and general maintenance than other, better known varieties.

"It really takes to heat," says Javier Barajas, track superintendent for Retama Park. "ZoyBoy likes that 95-degree weather." Currently, the turf is being watered for about five minutes, three times a day, he adds. By comparison, the turf track at Arlington International Racecourse, where Barajas worked for

18 years, required frequent watering — about ten minutes to 15 minutes each night.

Larry Clark, ASLA, of Bender Wells Clark Design oversaw the installation of 550,000 square feet of ZoyBoy last November. Twelve acres of the sod were unrolled to cover the track, which measures 1 1/8 miles by 90 feet. The turf was cut into segments 42 inches wide by 112 feet long. Nylon net was placed over the rootzones to protect the roots and make the rolls easier to handle. The segments were rolled onto lengths of PVC pipe. Three light-duty tractors unfurled the rolls of grass in five days, roughly 1/6 of the time it would have taken had the track been sodded by conventional means.

Soil Specifications

Bender Wells Clark Design specified that a ten-inch soil layer be placed over a gravel drainage layer to establish a separation from subsoil moisture. Proper procedure for establishing a high-traffic turf on horse racetracks involves the use of a high-sand rootzone construction, with an underdrain layer. The high sand content of the rootzone allows deep root growth, rapid draining of the soil after a rain and good footing for racing.

Turfgrass experts recognize and understand the need to avoid placing a layer of finer-textured soil at the rootzone that differs from the soil found below the rootzone. The finer-textured soil attached to a sod being transplanted onto a high-sand soil will typically form a layer known as a "perched hydration zone" of excess water above the interface with the underlying high-sand rootzone. In other words, surface water will not penetrate beyond the depth of the fine-soil layer until that layer reaches full saturation. Only then will water begin leaching into the high-sand zone below. A perched hydration zone can lead to excessive divoting and a general deterioration in the surface quality of the turf.

Given this possibility, the landscape architect chose a sod that was propagated and grown off-site in a soil medium specified to be as close as possible to the same soil-particle distribution as the soil used in the rootzone layer at the construction site. The root structure of the ZoyBoy zoysiagrass allowed the sod to be harvested with as little as 1/8-inch of soil substrate attached.

Dr. Milt Engelke, an agronomist and professor of turfgrass breeding, genetics and management at Texas A&M University who has worked with the zoysia genus for 15 years, is consulting with Retama Park to develop the best management practices for a first-class turf track. Although he has never worked with ZoyBoy previously, Engelke says, "Zoysia as a species offers an opportunity to provide a racetrack that's second to none."

Preliminary reports on the performance of the grass on the turf track have been favorable, and the track superintendent expects the fully established grass to be even better. "I think it's going to be a very strong turf course," Barajas says. "It's going to handle a lot of races." □

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