

# Two tales of tall fescue

*I am the relatively new Director of Operations for a large school district in central Illinois that recently completed building a new high school complex. During construction the "what type of sod/seed?" question arose regarding the soccer field. We have an existing field that is primarily Turf Type Fescue. We have had very good performance on this field with respect to ball roll, turf recovery, and mowing height. But all the turf "professionals" in our area indicate that turf type fescue would be an undesirable turf for soccer because it had an insufficient root system and tended to become "too clumpy" to allow recovery after play. They said finding turf type fescue in a sod would be very difficult, if not impossible. The consensus was that since we have an irrigation system, a sports blend of 4 to 5 bluegrasses would be preferable. Is there an "industry" opinion regarding which type of turf makes the best fields for soccer competition?*

James Lovelace

I guess I fit your category of turf "professional" but let me weigh in on both sides of this issue. I have clearly straddled this fence before and knowing which way to dismount requires consideration of several factors. Species selection is very important, but it needs to be considered along with other factors such as: irrigation, commitment to reseeding, desired field performance and mowing height, amount of traffic, and in your case prior experience.

**Prior experience.** You indicated that turf-type tall fescue has performed very well in the area of ball roll, turf recovery, and mowing height. If it ain't broke don't fix it. We all learn from local experience and if this grass has worked for you in a similar situation then I would certainly be inclined to stay with what is tried and true. That puts one leg on your side of the fence. I have had good success with turf-type tall fescue on soccer fields when I am assured of three things: automatic irrigation, reasonable traffic control, and a commitment to annual reseeding to maintain cover and prevent clumping. Aeration, fertilizer, and routine mowing should not be limiting. Because of your successful experience with turf-type tall fescue in this situation I would not dissuade you from using this grass.

**Tall fescue too clumpy.** Turf pros, myself included, will caution you with this grass because we have all probably been exposed to situations where it has become very clumpy, and for soccer this is a disaster. We tend to remember disasters.

My worst memory of trying to defend tall fescue was in front of a group of soccer boosters (now known as soccer moms) that invited me down to Jefferson City, MO, to see the field that they had installed one year after following my recommendation to plant tall fescue. I was expecting some wonderful compliments but after my first glimpse of the field I knew I was dead meat. I was no match for the ire of a 5-foot-4 inch lady with a

pixie haircut who frequently pointed with an extended index finger as she noted my inadequacies related to turf recommendations.

That was more than 10 years ago and to this day I still give the disclaimer that "tall fescue in some situations may result in a clumpy and undesirable surface, especially in sports like soccer and baseball where ball roll is important." Tall fescue is a very deep-rooted, drought tolerant, and wear tolerant bunch grass. These combined traits sound wonderful but can easily lead to a nearly unplayable surface in some situations.

Under dry or traffic conditions the tall fescue clumps will grow very well while the other cool season bluegrass and ryegrass become dormant, worn, and flat, thus exaggerating the tall fescue clumps. It is critical to supply enough irrigation, reseeding, aeration, and traffic control to avoid tall fescue clumping. If a tall fescue field begins to clump it will not recover on its own because it is not a spreading type of grass.

**Grass choices.** In your area Kentucky bluegrass is more widely used for soccer because it tolerates lower mowing, forms a denser turf, and seldom clumps even when the field is sufficiently worn to expose soil. With these considerations I must clearly put the other leg temporarily on the other side of the fence in favor of Kentucky bluegrass. So here we sit, no decision, and in a precarious position straddling the fence.

**Decision time.** I always weigh in heavily on the side of experience, and in this case your previous success with tall fescue is more important than all of the failures some of us have experienced in other settings. In your case I vote stick to your guns and stay with the tall fescue. Plan on reseeding with more tall fescue and some ryegrass if needed to keep the density and help the field fill-in when needed. Avoid using Kentucky bluegrass in the mix since it has poor seedling traffic tolerance and if established it will only add to the clumping effect of the fescue. Our seedling traffic trials indicate that perennial ryegrass is the best, followed closely by tall fescue, with Kentucky bluegrass a distant last. Your irrigation system will not be wasted, since it will be very useful each year in the recovery of a tall fescue field. Don't think that because turf type tall fescue is drought tolerant it doesn't need irrigation for soccer.

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**A successful 5-year old stand of turf type tall fescue with over 50 soccer events each year in central Iowa. Field is routinely irrigated, fertilized, and over seeded with tall fescue in worn areas.**



**An unsuccessful soccer field where conditions have resulted in the dreaded "clumps of tall fescue" that lead to recommendations for alternative grasses.**

## Have Questions?

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