

BY BECKY TALBOT

RACING WITH TIME

It was a good news/bad news situation last year when Chris Weavil found out that Tanglewood Park would once again be hosting an annual steeplechase horse race. As maintenance supervisor of the park, he would have to get the track in shape within a matter of months. And it was the middle of a July drought.

For 31 years, the park held an annual spring steeplechase event on its 9.99-mile track, but lost its slot during a management transition. "We'd been out of the steeplechase race for 3 years in 2002," says Weavil, who started as horticulturist at Tanglewood in 1991. "During the time we didn't have the race, we continued mowing the track, but we didn't fertilize or groom it. Basically it was a 10-acre pasture."

The former estate of William Neil Reynolds, brother of R.J., the tobacco king, Tanglewood Park is located in Forsyth County, North Carolina, just outside Winston-Salem. Among other endeavors, Reynolds bred and raised harness horses and operated one of the largest harness racing tracks in the South. He deeded his estate to Forsyth County when he passed away in the early 1950s and the county turned it into a park.

Encompassing 1300 acres, Tanglewood Park embraces two 18-hole golf courses, an arboretum, several fishing lakes, a paddleboat lake, horse stables, tennis courts, and playgrounds, in addition to the steeplechase track. A certified arborist and registered North Carolina landscape contractor, Weavil maintains more than 500 acres of turf and landscape plants, including an 800-shrub all-American rose garden, the expansive front lawn of the lodging facility, and hundreds of large, mature trees, as well as the track. The golf course operates separately from the rest of the park activities.

Fescue shades out Bermuda

Located 100 feet from the Yadkin River, the steeplechase track is a combination of fescue and bermudagrass. "We keep the fescue at 6 inches year-round and that shades out most of the bermudagrass," says Weavil. "Taller grass is good for the race because it slows

the horses down. If they start running flat out, they could miss their jump and get hurt. We raise the height to 10 inches for the actual race; at that height it's like dragging your feet through snow."

But Weavil had a tough time last year keeping the grass as high as 6 inches. In 2002, North Carolina experienced a severe drought. "We were about 30 inches short of rain when we heard in July that we would be hosting the race in October," he says. "We knew we had to do something to get the grass kicked up again."

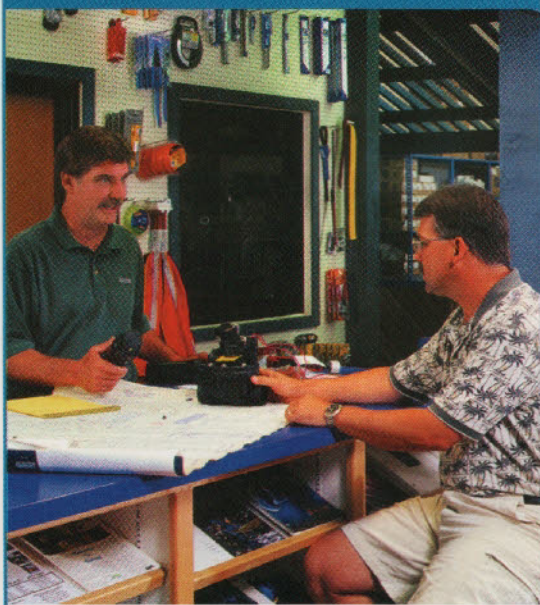
Though Weavil had always used Nitroform Blue Chip on the track, he hadn't been fertilizing during the hiatus for the race. "We have always liked the way Nitroform works," says Weavil. "It has a very low water-soluble component, just enough to provide a nice, green color quickly. The rest of the product is broken down by soil microbes. We could keep the track green with one timely spring application each year."

Weavil knew it was a little late for a nitrogen application this time. "We knew we were living on the edge a little, but we also knew that Nitroform wouldn't burn the grass any more than it was already burned by the drought," he adds. "We took a chance and made the application. Then we started getting rain in early September and within a month the track turned around and greened up. It was perfect for the race the first weekend in October."

Weavil was skeptical about applying a quick-release fertilizer because he knew if he didn't get rain, he wouldn't have any grass. "The high salt-index would have burned it to nothing," he says. "We pulled soil samples in September and got them back from analysis before the race last year. The only thing we needed was a little more nitrogen. Being in a river bottom, it's fairly silty, so all of our nutrients are present."

Horse traffic, in addition to foot traffic getting to the infield and parking areas, tore up the track during the race last year. "After the race, we aerated as soon as there was enough ground moisture for our pull-behind aerators to work," says Weavil. "But we only lime the track about every 3 years."

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around the grounds



Last fall, Weavil spread Nitroform on the track at the rate of 1 lb. N per 1,000 sq. ft. He applied it with a granular Viccon spreader, putting 300-400 lb. of product in the hopper at a time. The spreader provides a smooth, even distribution. He then made a light application of Nitroform in the spring to jump-start the fescue for the season. It keeps the cool-season grasses green throughout the summer months, he says.

In North Carolina, the weather this year did a complete flip-flop from last year. It rained so much the track was under water three times and the riverbank was higher than the infield. "We couldn't aerate until May because it was so wet," remarks Weavil. "But the microbial activity was going strong and the track stayed green all summer."

The National Steeplechase Association provides parameters for track conditions before the race, including grass height, compaction, and health. Association

representatives make inspections at 2 months, 1 month, 2 weeks and 2 days before the race. The last inspection looks for holes and hazards in the track.

Back in the day, the Tanglewood Steeplechase Race attracted some 12,000 people. Now sponsored by a Winston-Salem radio station and televised locally, the race drew 8,000 last year, but many more are expected this year as word of the new time slot spreads. Tickets are sold as tailgating spaces, with sponsors' row of tents providing food and beverages. In one afternoon, five three-lap races are held, rain or shine.

It takes Weavil's 22-member crew at least a week to clean up afterwards. "But it's well worth it to get the race back," he says. "It's an exciting event and we look forward to hosting it for many more years."

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Becky Talbot is a free lance writer living in Ambler, PA.



Members of Big Brothers Big Sisters of St. Joseph County, Indiana listen in as representatives from Toro and Notre Dame talk about what it takes to keep the turf at Notre Dame Stadium in top shape. Toro is the exclusive provider of grounds maintenance equipment for the University of Notre Dame's athletic facilities. Back row, left to right: Tony Wittrock, Tom Nowlin, Andrew Nemeth and Dorothy Johnson. Front row, left to right: Marcus Neely, Joe Wukowtich, Andrew Vandervort and Courtney Black.