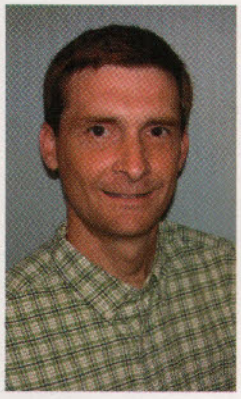
You may need a blanket!



BY DR. GRADY MILLER
Professor, North Carolina State University

Questions? Send them to Grady Miller at North Carolina State University, Box 7620, Raleigh, NC 27695-7620, or email grady_miller@ncsu.edu

Or, send your question to David Minner at Iowa State University, 106 Horticulture Hall, Ames, IA 50011 or email dminner@iastate.edu.

I have responsibility for getting several baseball fields in central North Carolina ready for play by June 2007. The fields are in different stages of completion. They are all sand-based fields and will be established to Tifway bermudagrass. One field was sprigged in mid-summer and is 95% covered, one was sprigged in late summer and is only about 50%, and the third field was set to be completed the first week of November. We will be hauling in sod harvested from a southern location for the last field. What are the options for getting the fields ready now [letter written in October 2006]?

This is a good question that has some obvious and not so obvious issues, which will have to be carefully considered. Central North Carolina is in the transition zone. It's an area that can grow bermudagrass, but it is certainly not going to be growing by the time one sits down for a Thanksgiving meal. So, if the fields are not mostly grown-in by November (or even earlier most years), then do not expect them to be grown-in when green up comes around in the spring.

Let's evaluate options for individual fields one at a time, starting with the easiest. To me the field that was sprigged first is the easiest because it is nearly established. When I visited the fields, I noted there were a few localized areas less than 3 feet in diameter that were bare due to one or another reason (irrigation repair, etc). With a little localized sodding or plugging, this field is basically ready for the winter. Once it greens up in the spring, there should be several weeks to make final adjustments and the field will be ready for play.

To me, the second easiest field is the one that will be sodded. They knew early on that this field was not going to be completed in time for sprigging so all parties agreed very early in the construction process to sod this field. While sodding this late in the year is has risks, previous research and experience indicate that it can be done with a reasonable assurance of success. One of the most important issues is that the sod, even though it is dormant, is not allowed to desiccate during the winter.

The last field is the problem field. There are several options. Option #1 is to do nothing and hope that global warming kicks up a few notches so that North Carolina has the warmest winter and spring on record. Option #2 is to tear up the half grown-in turf, smooth the surface, and then sod the field. Option #3 is to do nothing to the turf, but cover the surface with some sort of cover or blanket, relying on the heat to promote growth and protect the crowns of the plant. And Option #4 is to overseed the weak stand of bermudagrass with a perennial ryegrass and manage the field as an overseeded field.

Option #1 is probably the worst choice. The odds are not in their favor that the field will go ahead and fill in by June. One could commit to this if you wanted to line up enough sod in the late spring to go ahead and sod the field once you determined that the sprigged surface was not going to be adequately grown-in for play. Remember that these are sand-based fields so putting sod over the sand is going to cause its own set of management issues. It is bad enough that you have one sod-over-sand field to manage.

That's also why Option #2 is poor. The sod layering issue means you likely will need to re-establish the field's grade before sodding, which introduces a significant negative–cost, including turf removal, grading, sod, and sod installation. This option probably provides the greatest assurance of success, however, and should result in a surface similar to the other field that will be sodded. But I would still consider other options.

Option #3 is to do nothing but cover the field. While this option may not seem to be a good because it takes less effort and is less expensive, let's further analyze this one. Remember, the field will go into November with at least 50% turf cover. The existing turf is adequately rooted and healthy. If you can heat up the soil surface a few degrees and prevent the nighttime soil surface from getting as cool, one might be able to pick up another 10% of growth before the turf succumbs to dormancy. There should be an even greater benefit in the spring. With sunny days and warming temperatures, the cover will promote more rapid greening and earlier growth. Since the field is not needed until June, the jumpstart in the spring should be enough to complete fill. Worst case the long, cold spring results in delayed dormancy not overcome by the cover. Then, spot sodding or total sodding may be necessary. There are risks associated with this option, but it may be the best.

What about #4? This is an interesting option that warrants serious consideration. On the positive side, the field will be ready for play in the spring (even though it is not needed at that time). The field could look beautiful in June with mowing patterns of the cool-season grass. It would take careful management to hold the cool-season grass into the summer, but it could be done. The cost would be nominal: seed, fertilizer, and labor to manage the turf over the winter. On the down side, the field could be stressed and look poor if there is an early, warm summer. You also have inconsistency among fields with one cool-season grass field and two bermudagrass fields. But the biggest downside is what happens when the cool-season turf does transition. The field may still only have 50% bermudagrass turf cover. And if you held the cool-season grass until late summer to early fall, then one is still facing the decision of what to plant.

No matter which option is chosen it must fit within any contracts or management plans currently in place. No option is without risks. All parties involved should be involved in on the final decision so that everyone is aware of the risks, and considerations can be made on how to respond if a risk becomes reality. ■