

From the Sidelines

Big Ten bermuda field is a winner



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By the time you read this the college football season should be over. While I'd like to expound at length about how ludicrous it is that the NCAA relies on regionally biased pollsters, coaches' proxies, computers, and television honchos to determine its "champion," let's instead re-visit a new field put in last summer to see how it fared.

After the decision was made in late 2005 to rebuild the field at Purdue University's Ross-Ade Stadium, Patriot bermudagrass was chosen over Kentucky bluegrass (not enough establishment time given when the decision was made) and synthetic infill systems (natural grass strongly preferred by coaches and athletes). The bermuda recommendation was supported by 3 years of research in West Lafayette, and Patriot was chosen because it thrived both in northern Indiana and another northern climate, Blacksburg, VA.

Al Capitos, the Boilermakers' athletic turf superintendent, said, "So far, so good. Everyone is happy with the bermuda. It stabilized the straight sand rootzone. We were very successful with growing it but not as successful with the overseeding process. We overseeded with ryegrass at 18 lbs. per 1,000, and that was not enough to establish before the Wisconsin game.

"The bermuda mat is so tight, and the leaf blades so fine, that it was tough to get the overseeding down into the growing medium. I didn't want to power overseed, instead we used a drop spreader, watered it, topdressed, and rolled it, but it was not enough to tolerate football traffic, and didn't look as good," Capitos said.

I asked him about the appearance of the turf when Purdue hosted Penn State the next week. From my couch, it didn't look good. "Though it was not aesthetically pleasing that game, the traction was there," Capitos said. "No grass was lost and the team was happy with it."

Purdue has a graduate student researching at what rate to overseed next year. "I'd rather have the good performance than good aesthetics," Capitos said. "Next spring we may use Roundup to kill the ryegrass because our growing window up north for bermuda is so short. I don't want any competition from rye for that bermuda. Over time we'll hone in on a better overseeding process but my concern with spring bermuda growing season, which doesn't start until late April or early May here, makes me be careful with the amount of ryegrass we put down. We don't want a long transition period.

"I can afford to do that because we only have one event in the spring, the Black and Gold game," said Capitos. "I don't care for that game if the grass is gold and the lines are black!"

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