

First timer



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 Horti-
culture Hall, Ames, IA 50011
or email
dminner@iastate.edu.

I work for an American-based engineering and construction company. I am project manager for a soccer stadium that is being built in west central Africa. A subcontractor from China is putting in the field and they are considering planting bermudagrass from seed for the turf. Given the equatorial climate, I think this is a good choice. However, there is no equivalent to an extension service here and this is the first playing surface I have ever installed and the subcontractor is not familiar with grasses for this area. Needless to say, I am a bit nervous! I was able to obtain a recommendation of a local "expert." He recommends a mixture of 90% bahiagrass with 10% bermudagrass. Based on my readings, this seems to be an inferior turf than 100% bermudagrass. The climate is similar to Southern Florida and we have the ability to irrigate during the dry season and fertilize as needed. Also, when would you recommend having the first cut? How long until the bermudagrass can be ready for play? Your thoughts would be much appreciated.

First, I would strongly encourage you to NOT include the bahiagrass. That would be a significant weed in a bermudagrass field. The bahiagrass would only have advantages if you were building a low-budget field without irrigation. The same is true in southern Florida. With irrigation and fertilizers available, stick with 100% bermudagrass.

I would suggest a single bermudagrass cultivar for maximum uniformity. To help ensure a long-term quality playing surface, great care needs to be taken when selecting the cultivar. There are a number of suitable cultivars available, so you may want to find out what is being supplied by the subcontractors. Please contact me again once you know more about the grass they are planning to use. I

would suggest you exert some influence on this decision if the subcontractor wants to plant a turfgrass that has not been commonly used on athletic fields. You do not want your first field to be a test subject for a new grass.

I think you just learned that one must be careful who they listen to or there may be significant penalties. I constantly tell sports turf managers to network locally to find out what is working or not working for other sports turf managers. If you are new to the area, this is even more important. It helps to know whom to listen to for advice. This is why the USA's extension service (or Cooperative Extension Service) is so valuable. Even if the state's extension turf specialist is not well versed in athletic field management, they have contacts and can provide names of people that can help. And they often host regional STMA meetings.

If someone does not know who to ask and happens to ask the wrong person, the advice can be bad. In your case it was good that you questioned the advice of the "local expert" and kept seeking information from other sources.

As for your other questions, my recommendation is to start cutting as soon as there is adequate root and stolon growth to support a

mower. If you have lightweight mowers then you can get out there sooner. Mowing promotes lateral growth, so you will want to mow as early as possible. There are too many variables that prevent me from giving you a concrete time before mowing is recommended. My advice is to try an area just off the field playing area. If the mower is easily supported, start clipping. If it causes even small ruts in the soil, then hold off and try again in a three or four days.

Most bermudagrass fields can be used for play in three months if the grass is "pushed" and it is responding. Realize it may take upward to 21 days after planting before most of the grass seedlings emerge. That is the slowest part of establishing bermudagrass from seed—slow germination and low seedling vigor. Once it begins to emerge, growth rates can be increased with high nitrogen fertilizer applications combined with irrigation. Good growing conditions, i.e., warm temperatures and ample sunlight, are paramount for rapid bermudagrass establishment.

Someone famous once said, "A man begins cutting his wisdom teeth the first time he bites off more than he can chew." As you work on this project, I hope you stay hungry! ■

