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Renovating Hybrid Bermudagrass

Continued from page 20

In some cases, the bermudagrass kicks in as the ryegrass fades away with little extra investment in time or expense. Some managers cut back on irrigation while others vertic peace to stimulate the bermudagrass and discourage the ryegrass. If the bermuda doesn't respond quickly, both the ryegrass and the bermudagrass are accused of failing the test.

"Hybrid bermudagrasses are great turf-grasses for sports," states Neil Beeson, manager of the Pro Turf Division at Pacific Sod, in Camarillo, CA, "but you can't forget about them all winter." Overseeding with heavy rates of ryegrass creates a dense turf that blocks sunlight and warmth from reaching the bermudagrass below, says Beeson. The bermuda has been using up its carbohydrate reserves while dormant and starts the spring in a weakened state. It needs to rebuild its reserves through photosynthesis before it can compete most effectively with another turfgrass.

"Mowing height is an important factor in helping bermudagrass build up reserves for winter dormancy and rhizomes for cold tolerance," points out Dr. Glenn Burton, developer of the "Tif" series of hybrid bermudagrasses at the Coastal Plains Research Station in Tifton, GA. "During a cold winter, golf courses in the northern part of the bermudagrass belt will suffer heavy losses on greens mowed at 3/16 inch, slight losses on fairways mowed at 1/2 to 3/4 inch, and no loss on roughs mowed at two inches. You can manage the turf before winter to improve its performance the following spring."

Sports turf managers don't think twice about reseeding divots and worn areas, but they seem to resist the idea of sprigging or stolonizing bermudagrass to help it recover. They will find a way to protect newly overseeded turf in the fall for three to four weeks, but they can't squeeze out another four weeks of protection in the spring to give new bermudagrass sprigs a chance to fill in.

Timing depends completely on location and when soil temperatures rise to more than 50 degrees F. As soil temperatures rise, the growth of the bermudagrass speeds up. Sprigging, or stolonizing, can take place as soon as the bermudagrass starts to green up. Bermuda may be dormant for four months in Kansas City or for two weeks in San Diego.

If this occurs in the midst of a busy season, there is a definite conflict. But sprigging or stolon planting can be delayed if necessary until summer. Some sports turf managers will manage overseeded ryegrass to prolong its usefulness until the bermudagrass can be renovated without disturbing a major event such as a tournament.

Stolons are shoots which originate at the base of the plant and extend along the surface of the soil. Rhizomes are shoots like stolons that extend laterally below the surface of the soil. By harvesting bermudagrass sod and pulling it apart with a shredder and removing the soil, pieces of stolons and rhizomes called sprigs are produced. When planted, these sprigs will produce new bermudagrass plants. Clippings are foliage and have no reproductive potential.

Once the sprigs are planted, they need 60 to 90 days to fill in completely. The most critical items are water followed by fertilizer. The sprigs depend completely on daily irrigation and the nutrients they received prior to harvesting until they develop a strong root system. The rate of root growth can vary based upon soil texture, temperature, soil pH, nutrients, moisture and competition from another turfgrass on the site. Once the root system is established, the aggressive turf spreads rapidly by a network of new rhizomes and stolons.

If use can't be restricted for a few weeks, Burton says that some sports turf managers have combined sprigging the hybrid with seedling common bermudagrass. "The hybrid will overtake the common in a season or two. Of course, establishment of the hybrid is faster with higher rates of sprigs."

"Once a coach, player or sports turf manager gets an eyeeful of Kentucky bluegrass or perennial ryegrass, that's what he wants," remarks Bill Flannigan, who operates a stolon planting service in Ventura, CA. "But the Southwest is desert and cool-season grasses just won't last for more than a few years. They are now accepting the fact that the hybrid Bermudas are finer-bladed, darker green and tougher than most other warm-season grasses. What's more, once they plant them and maintain them properly, they'll be around many years from now."

Once a golf course superintendent or sports turf manager decides hybrid bermuda is what he wants, he has three choices. He can sprig, he can plant plugs, or he can sod. Planting four-inch plugs every few inches on a large site is generally impractical. Strip sodding is similar to plugging. Total sodding provides instant cover but costs more than $20,000 for a single football field and is prohibitive for golf courses. The difference between sprigging and sodding is about four cents a square foot compared to 35 cents a square foot. "Sprigging allows a larger number of schools, parks and golf courses to take advantage of hybrid bermudagrass," states Dr. Tim Bowyer, president of Southern Turf Nurseries in Norcross, GA. "It is an economical method of providing top quality cover for large, heavily-used areas."

Sprigs can be planted by any of four methods. Three of the methods require specific types of equipment operated by knowledgeable individuals. A sprigging contractor has basic fixed costs to transport this equipment to a job site. For this reason small areas, 20,000 square feet or less, may be sprigged most economically by the sports turf manager. A sprigging contractor can renovate three to four fields in a single day.

The most common method of planting is the one used by sod growers to plant their farms, generally referred to as stolonizing. The machinery broadcasts processed sprigs.
at a predetermined rate onto the prepared soil. Two offset rows of dull discs then crimp the sprigs an inch or more into the ground. Most machines have a roller to compress the soil around the sprigs after they are planted.

Between five to eight bushels of sprigs are broadcast per 1,000 square feet. One of these machines can plant 12 acres per day. Preparation for stolonizing is the same as it would be for seeding.

Flannigan has developed a stolon planter that takes fresh sod and shreds it into sprigs just before they are planted. "It saves the sod grower from processing and packaging sprigs and gives you fresher material," says Flannigan. "Sprigs must be kept cool after they are processed. The longer the time you have to wait between processing and planting, the more you have to worry about the vigor of the sprigs."

Topdressing the area after planting is sometimes recommended. "Just make sure your topdressing is compatible with the soil on site," warns Flannigan. "Layering can cause trouble down the road."

A sprigger is the second type of specialized machinery used. The planter utilizes pairs of discs spaced two to four inches apart to open up rows of slits in the soil to receive the sprigs. The sprigs are placed into the slits which are then closed by sets of rollers. This method requires a smaller amount of sprigs and less soil preparation.

A relatively new and controversial method of planting sprigs uses a hydraulic mulcher. The sprigs are mixed in the tank with mulch, water, and fertilizer and sprayed at high pressure on a prepared seedbed. Mike Santoro, president of Southern California Hydroseed & Hydromulch, Inc, in Temecula, CA, is frequently called to sprig fairways, baseball fields and worn-out football fields.

"You really have to know what you are doing," he states. The sprigs must be fresh, clamp-free, and fairly uniform in size. "Only experience shows you how to get the sprigs down at the right rate and evenly. We do a half acre at a time putting down 10 bushels per 1,000 square feet. Since the sprigs are applied with water and mulch, you have a little more leeway with irrigation. The mulch protects the sprigs from drying out rapidly. You can add a tackifier in real windy conditions."

Detractors of hydrosprigging say the sprigs lay on the surface instead of being pushed into the topsoil. Santoro says if properly sprayed, the sprigs do enter the soil. However, few dispute the benefit of the mulch. Hydromulching can replace the topdressing process. "Our success rate has been tremendous, so to me whether the sprigs are deep enough in the soil doesn't seem to make any difference."

Santoro says sports turf managers like hydrosprigging because large areas can be planted without pulling heavy equipment over the area. It can also be used to plant areas in hilly or rolling terrain. "Golf course architects like to shape golf courses with mounds and rolling fairways," Santoro points out. Flannigan, on the other hand, states, "If you can mow it, we can plant it with a stolon planter."

For small areas, broadcasting sprigs by hand and discing them in is most economical. Some sod growers have walk-behind discs to lend to their customers who want to sprig by hand. A core aerator can be substituted for the discs by going over the sprigs six to eight times in different directions. Small areas are also topdressed more easily. Whether renovating existing turf or planting for the first time, soil preparation and maintenance after sprigging are of critical importance. The first step is a complete soil test to determine nutrient levels, soil texture and soil pH. Phosphorus levels are especially important to speed rooting along. Root development can also be slowed by excessively acid or alkaline soils. A heavy thatch layer will further expose the delicate sprigs to rapid drying.

Renewing a field's crown or changing a green's slope should be done prior to sprigging. Poor or compacted soil should be aerated and amended to provide well-textured conditions.

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soil for planting. Don't work the soil too much, warns Dr. Art Bruneau, turf specialist at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. "If you break it down to a powder, it will turn to rock as soon as the water is turned on."

Sites with dry spots should be treated with wetting agents to provide uniform drainage and water retention for the sprigs. Finally, the area covered by each irrigation station should be identified so that the contractor can plant one station at a time.

Flannigan recommends two other preplanting steps when planting through existing turf. "A few weeks before sprigging, reduce the mowing height to 3/8- or 1/2-inch and pick up the clippings each time you mow. The week before, irrigate heavily to moisten the soil down to a foot. Two days beforehand, back off the irrigation." If the contractor is not fertilizing, apply fertilizer with a formulation based on soil tests.

Insist on fresh sprigs from the start and insist the sod grower to see how he maintains and harvests his sprigs, says Flannigan. "Don't accept sprigs that have been stored in a cooler for very long."

"Once the sprigging contractor pulls his equipment onto the site, he has to plant," explains Flannigan. "He can't wait for last minute changes because the sprigs are perishable. He should plant by irrigation station. If you are topdressing, do it fast. You have between 15 minutes and an hour after planting to start irrigating depending upon temperature, wind and soil moisture. You want to pour on the water and keep pouring it on for at least the next three weeks. Then, slowly back off the water until the sprigs are fully established. Continue to mow low to encourage the bermuda to tiller."

Fertilize and irrigate heavily, says Bruneau, with up to one half pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every ten days. To improve wear tolerance, add potassium, especially if nitrogen sources containing ammonium were used to push the bermuda. Potassium increases the strength of the turf tissue, but it can be leached out by ammonium sulfate or ammonium nitrate, reports Dr. James Beard at Texas A&M University, College Station.

Use weed control with discretion, states Dr. Euel Coates, professor of weed science at Mississippi State University. Many herbicides can slow root development when the sprigs are young. However, weed control may be more important than fast establishment for sites with a history of crabgrass and/or goosegrass infestation. Coates recommends applying Ronstar preemergence herbicide after planting in such cases. The herbicide does not interfere with rooting.

"You should also consider that the bermuda benefits when competition from weeds is eliminated," he adds. Pay close attention to labels on postemergence herbicides.

"Usually they state that applications should be delayed for at least two to three mowings, but you might want to hold off for 90 days."

"A word of caution to sports turf managers about hybrid bermudagrasses...they have poor shade tolerance. If a green or fairway is surrounded by trees, don't be surprised when the bermudagrass fails to fill in rapidly. It's not unusual for fields at large stadiums to be at least partially shaded during the spring and fall."

Some stadium managers have tried topdressing with activated charcoal to absorb and hold heat in the soil. Perforated plastic covers and geotextiles have also been used to keep the soil warm during establishment. Just be alert to excessive heat and humidity under the covers which may encourage diseases.

Ninety days is a long time to keep sports turf out of play. Add another 30 days for overseeding and that takes away four usable months. Fortunately, with proper management, renovation of hybrid bermudagrass sports turf is not an annual necessity. Once the bermuda establishes a dense network of roots and rhizomes, it resists damage and thinning better than almost any other type of warm-season turfgrass. If heavy use takes its toll after two or three years, investing in sprigging is a small price to pay for three more years of quality summer sports turf.
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Without fanfare, the staff at American Golf Corporation carried on business as usual last fall when the number of golf courses under their management topped 100. The well-tuned organization was too busy working out the details for adding another six courses to stop and celebrate.

In fact, Mike Heacock, vice president of maintenance, isn’t sure which course was the 100th. “Once you get the kinks out of the system, additional growth comes smoothly,” states Heacock, who is responsible for the quality of maintenance at all 106 of the company’s golf courses. “It took us 11 years to grow from three courses to 28. The remaining 78 courses have been added in the past five years.”

This phenomenal spurt of growth was not luck or a fluke — it was the result of a carefully managed growth plan designed to meet a goal set forth by company founder David Price in 1982 to reach 100 courses in five years. The growth would never have been possible without the management system he developed during the company’s first 17 years. And he is still constantly refining the system. “I want us to be the best managed company in the business,” he remarks. We’re at about two thirds of what we are capable of now.”

His system was rough 22 years ago when he first became involved with managing golf courses as personal attorney to Los Angeles businessman Joe Drown. Among other properties, such as the Bel-air Hotel and Biff’s restaurants, Drown owned the private Yorba Linda Country Club in Orange County, CA. In a diversified property management company one golf course was more a novelty than a business.

Price convinced Drown to develop land he owned near Los Angeles International Airport into a public golf course, Westchester Country Club. “We built the course in 1966 and the first two years of operation were a disaster,” recalls Price. “We really didn’t know anything about running golf courses.”

But they kept on trying and bought El Segundo Golf Course a few miles south of the airport. While complaints from golfers got under Drown’s skin, they inspired Price. They weren’t one of Drown’s better investments, but attorney Price saw their potential.

“I had the idea that if you concentrated on management and treated the customers well and courteously so that they would want to come back, you could make money with a golf course,” Price states. To this day Drown remains Price’s mentor — his picture sits on Price’s desk — but when it came to golf, the successful Drown had little to prove and the young Price felt he could make his mark in the golf business. In 1971, Drown gave Price his blessing to pursue his idea and sold him the three golf courses.

With almost no capital, Price started California Golf. As the story goes, Drown overheard a golfer in the lounge at Yorba Linda Country Club say, “I wonder what Drown is going to do to us next!” The next day Drown came into Price’s office and said, “Do you still want to work a deal on those golf courses?” Without hesitation, Price took out a dollar bill, wrote DEAL and his initials on it, and gave it to Drown to sign. By signing it, Drown lost his personal attorney and left the golf course business.

At first, says Price, “We were just operating and doing the best job we could. The biggest surprise was the amount of capital required to restore a run-down course. We also didn’t know much about forecasting or even, in some cases, what we were going to do with a specific problem.”

One problem he faced immediately was losing all the greens at Westchester. The former Navy pilot had learned that without a top mechanic, flying was a risky business. He needed a superintendent good enough to trust with his business life. Having been impressed with the condition of Heartwell Golf Course in Long Beach, Price asked head pro Jack Henry who the superintendent was. Henry introduced Price to Richard Bermudez. A partnership was formed that continues to this day.

The problem now was the pilot Price also had to be his own navigator. Straining for more capital, Price managed to acquire another dozen courses in the next six years. He learned he didn’t have to own the course to run it profitably. He also recognized that municipal courses frequently carry a low priority among municipal services and utilities. When they receive the attention they deserve, they carry more rounds than any other type of course.

By leasing its golf course(s) to Price, a city was assured of income without the headaches of management, labor and some capital improvements. Bermudez would improve the course to attract golfers while Price and his management staff would smooth out any kinks in the pro shop, food service, cart rental and driving range. California Golf promotes the course, provides equipment and staff, and evaluates the golf market in the area so the course can be positioned to make a profit, just as you would any business.

A typical lease pays a city a minimum rent or a percentage of course income, whichever is greater. In many cases, American Golf must invest large sums of money in capital improvements to get the course in shape. It can take the company years to recover its investment. The only way it can recover its investment and make a profit is to make sure the course succeeds. “If that isn’t motivation to run a club to the satisfaction of golfers, I don’t know what is,” states Heacock.

“We have never made money except by getting a course into condition,” he continues. “We don’t make money by cutting back on equipment, chemicals, irrigation or qualified staff. If the course doesn’t attract golfers, we haven’t done our job.”

In fact, one of Heacock’s major responsibilities is seeing that the courses can handle the rounds they must to be profitable. Cart paths are added or enlarged, bigger tees are constructed and the hazards are adjusted to match the ability of the type of golfer playing the course. “We aren’t a construction company. We try not to rebuild greens and reconfigure fairways. We put the emphasis on proper maintenance.”

By 1982, California Golf had grown to 26 courses. Golf courses and municipalities outside of the Southwest were calling to see if California Golf could manage their courses. Only one other company had ever managed more than 30 courses, Club Corporation of America (CCA) in Dallas. There were a few companies that managed less than ten courses, but primarily on a regional basis. Price had to decide if the potential for his company stretched beyond the Southwest.

His response was clear. The name of the company was changed to American Golf Corporation, a goal of 100 courses in five years was set and a management structure was created to handle golf course management anywhere within the U.S.

Price needed a strong copilot and found one in Bob Williams. Williams was president of Club Corporation and knew the formula of customer satisfaction and professional management. He had put together the management structure that worked for CCA and shared Price’s opinion that golf course management could be performed on a national basis.

The country was divided into regions and a director was appointed for each. He was made responsible for the income and expenses of all courses in his region. He was also put in charge of developing and
training the general managers at each course and a regional superintendent. The general managers report to the regional director and the superintendent worked for the general manager. The regional superintendent worked for the regional director, serving as an advisor on maintenance of all his courses. If maintenance problems developed that the regional superintendent could not handle, the general manager would consult Bermudez based in Santa Monica, CA.

With a structure in place, Price and Williams created an acquisition department to locate potential customers and to develop bids to take over management. The company now had a track record to sell and an organization capable of managing golf courses almost anywhere in the country.

To tie the whole organization together, Price added one more business motivator – a piece of the action based upon growth of profit. Each region and course operate largely as a separate business. Everyone in the region receives a salary plus a bonus based upon the increase in profit from the previous year. Purchases are made by the individual clubs at local distributors.

To make sure the superintendent has what he needs to meet standards set for his course, his maintenance schedule and budget are reviewed by Santa Monica. Once approved, he is on his own with the exception that he has a regional superintendent and a vice president of maintenance there if he needs them.

As Bermudez became more involved with national concerns, he needed someone to focus his efforts on the Southwest. He knew Heacock, superintendent at prestigious Lakeside Country Club, from the active role Heacock played in both the Southern California Golf Course Superintendents Association and the California Golf Course Association. With only a desk and a phone in the maintenance building at La Mirada Country Club, Heacock went to work backing up American Golf superintendents spread out across Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Both Bermudez and Heacock feel most at home on a golf course. Even though today they both have offices in the company's plush headquarters in Santa Monica, chances are you won't find them there. After travelling extensively to New York, Georgia, Florida and Texas, Bermudez now spends much of his time fine tuning his favorite courses in Southern California. Heacock has taken over troubleshooting on a national basis.

Today there are 11 regional superintendents and 106 superintendents. "They don't work for me," says Heacock. "I'm here to help them in case they get in a jam. They are encouraged to work with their local extension service, distributors and associations like any superintendent should."

That doesn't mean Heacock doesn't know what's going on at any particular course on any day. In a file cabinet beside his desk, he has the maintenance schedules, budgets and progress reports for all 106 courses. Of these, 58 are leased from municipalities, 14 are operated for private owners and 34 are owned by American Golf.

If a problem comes up, Heacock first tries to solve it with the regional superintendent over the phone. If that doesn't work, he throws the file into his briefcase and hops on the next plane. While he's on the road, he stops to look at other courses the acquisition department is working on. On the plane back, he writes his report on a laptop computer.

The system seems to be working quite well. The accusation that a large multi-management company like American Golf cuts corners to squeeze every dime out a course has been answered by the quality of its courses today, says Heacock.

Price's next goal is clear, "To be one of the best managed companies in the world. The company as a whole would be an example to other businesses as superb management no matter what their industry is." He wants that remaining 33 percent. To get it, the company will hold its first Operations College this fall for general managers and superintendents. The college will cover one thing, how to manage their businesses. Every regional director has already attended management training seminars.

"Golf is more than a sport," says Heacock, "it's a business. When you forget that, you get in trouble."
Wyoming Launches "Hands-On" Seminar

The focus will be on "getting it out of the classroom and onto the field" when the Wyoming Groundskeepers and Growers Association holds its first-ever Athletic Field Maintenance Seminar July 28-29 in Green River, WY.

Steve Wightman, of Denver's Mile High Stadium, will be the main speaker at the two-day event. He will be assisted by the Green River Parks and Recreation Department's Roger Moellendorf. Topics on the agenda include turf maintenance, grooming infields, preparing infields, turf infields, football fields, special irrigation needs, and safety.

More information may be obtained by contacting Roger Moellendorf, City of Green River, 50 East 2nd North, Green River, WY 82935, 307/875-5000, ext. 51.

PGMSTo Host Maintenance Workshop

The Professional Grounds Management Society and the City of Lenoir, NC, will host the Athletic Facilities Management Workshop July 19-20 at the Mulberry Recreation Center in Lenoir.

The workshop is designed for school, county, and municipal athletic facility managers. Presentations from qualified speakers will cover irrigation, fencing and bleachers, facility scheduling, mowers, fertilization, geotextiles, miscellaneous equipment, and other topics. Equipment demonstrations will be held on July 20.

The registration fee before July 8 is $40 for PGMS members, $55 for nonmembers. For more information, contact PGMS, (301) 667-1833 or the City of Lenoir, (704) 754-9521.

Golf Course Architects Elect Dye President

Pete Dye of Del Ray Beach, FL, was elected president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) at the group's recent annual meeting in Bermuda. The ASGCA is comprised of leading golf course architects from North America.

Dye, who has been a golf course architect for 29 years, has designed such well-regarded courses as Crooked Stick Golf Club, Carmel, IN; Oak Tree Golf Club, Edmond, OK; The Golf Club, Columbus, OH; PGA West, LaQuinta, CA; and the Tournament Players Club, Ponte Vedra, FL.

Robert Trent Jones, Jr., of Palo Alto, CA, was elected vice president by the group. Other new officers are secretary Dan Maples of Pinehurst, NC, and treasurer Tom Clark of Wheaton, MD.

Geomatrix Systems Rejoins Dutch Firm

The Geomatrix Systems product group, which markets Enkamat, Enkadrain, Enka-sonic, and Armater throughout the country, has been sold back to Akzo by BASF. Akzo is an $8 billion Dutch company whose engineers invented most of the products.

Geomatrix Systems had become part of BASF Corporation in December 1985 as part of its purchase of American Enka Corp., which had been a subsidiary of Akzo.

Akzo, a leading international company in fibers and polymers, salt, chemicals, coatings and pharmaceuticals, has 250 operating units and nearly 70,000 employees in 50 countries.

Samuel W. Mays

Samuel W. Mays Sr., vice president of sales and marketing for Club Car, Inc., died April 28 at his home in Augusta, GA, after a long illness. He was 51.

Mays spent 31 years in the golf car manufacturing industry and was a founding member of TPC (Sawgrass), a member of the Augusta Golf Association, and an original member of the board of directors of the National Golf Car Manufacturers Association. He was also an active member of the advisory board of the Golf Manufacturers and Distributors Association.

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