

Bentgrass in Florida: Rolling the Dice Again!

Old Marsh Knowingly Decides To Gamble and Try Bentgrass

BY JOEL JACKSON, CGCS

I know. I know. You're saying, "Why in the world would anyone plant straight bentgrass greens in Florida? Didn't we already try that in the mid 1980s?"

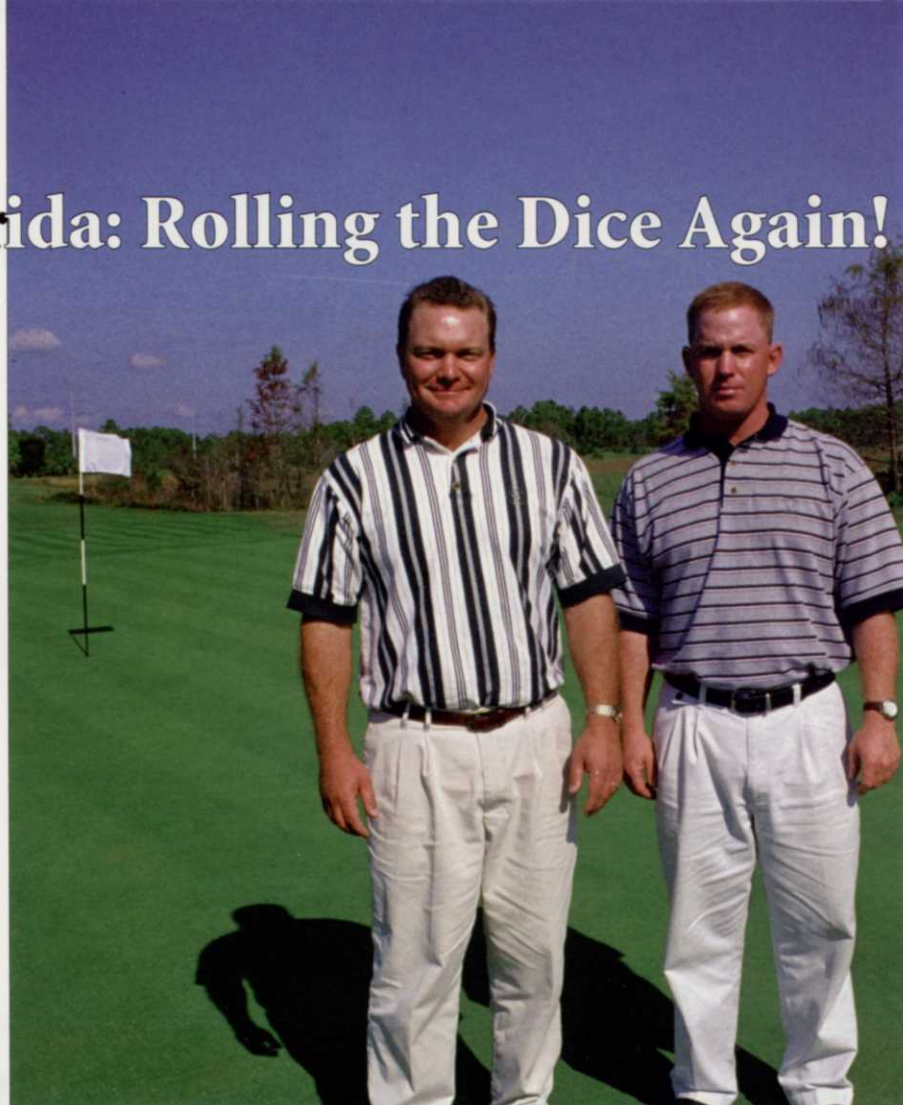
The answer to the second question is, "Yes, and only one of them still has their bentgrass greens."

The answer to the first question is a little more complicated and is the reason for this article.

Before the word gets out that the Old Marsh Country Club in Palm Beach Gardens has planted bentgrass greens and the members just love it, I wanted to do an article about what went into the decision and the factors involved at Old Marsh that made it feasible at least to make the attempt.

Back up to 1996. The greens at Old Marsh were 13 years old and the original Tifdwarf was not performing well, especially during overseeding and transition. The owner, Larry Delpig, Sr. and the members were of a mind to replant the greens to improve the playing conditions year round. Superintendent Steve Ehrbar, CGCS began looking at the new ultradwarf grasses down in Fort Lauderdale at the FGCSA Research Green. While these had definite possibilities, they do not overseed easily and the members were not keen on some of the area courses they played that were not overseeded. So Ehrbar began looking at the new bentgrass varieties.

Dr. Milt Engelke of Texas A&M, developer of the new Crenshaw bentgrass, was brought on board as a consultant. Engelke had also been involved with the bentgrass greens at the nearby Loxahatchee Golf Club, which recently decided to replant with bermuda. Steve and Dr. Engelke rode and graded the entire golf course, rating each green for



After a year of testing several bentgrass varieties on the site, Superintendent Steve Ehrbar, CGCS, left, and his assistant Jim Colo are optimistic about their chances of managing all of the newly replanted G-2 greens at the Old Marsh Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens. Photo by Joel Jackson.

soil profile, drainage, air movement, sunlight, traffic patterns and contours. The course graded out to a B - B+ rating and Dr. Engelke ventured that it might be possible to try some of the new bentgrasses.

The owner asked Ehrbar to come up with a proposal of what tools it might take to grow bentgrass and he looked at aerifiers, fans, and irrigation modifications. Ehrbar visited with Scott Bell at Bent Pine in Vero Beach with his bentgrass-over-bermuda base greens and with David Lowe at the Plantation at Ponte Vedra, who still had 15-year-old Penncross greens from the mid 1980s. Lowe has had to resort to installing several fans on each green for his location, and this was not acceptable for Old Marsh. Ehrbar also visited a course in

South Carolina with Crenshaw greens.

At the GCSAA conference in Anaheim, Ehrbar attended a presentation by the superintendent of Pinehurst #2 that had new G-2 bentgrass greens and heard what an aggressive Mat-A-Way and top-dressing program it required. He also talked to superintendents from the Atlanta area to pick up any information he could about bentgrass management in the south. But each location and course is different and the only place to really tell is on your own course. So, that's what Old Marsh did.

In 1997 Ehrbar planted the practice green in G-2 bentgrass and planted a chipping green with 1/3 Crenshaw, 1/3 L-93 and 1/3 with a blend of those two varieties. He managed those greens for a whole year putting them through height

of cut changes and different watering and fertility schedules. He sprayed fungicides only once and saw only limited fungus activity on all three surfaces.

After all this research and testing, the owner and the board decided to give G-2 bentgrass a chance.

"The board reasoned that we are going to re-grass anyhow," Ehrbar said. "What if we give G-2 a try? Old Marsh does approximately 18,000 rounds per year and 16,000 of those rounds are between Nov. 1 and May 1 when conditions would be most favorable to bentgrass.

"The most likely time for problems will be July, August and September when the club is the slowest anyhow. Last year revealed that G-2 responded the quickest of the three to injury when it was being put through different management worst-case scenarios."

The greens were originally built to modified USGA specifications. They were straight DOT sand with no choker

layer. Percolation rates range from 17 inches per hour to the mid-20s.

The re-grassing plan was to not disturb the surface contours. Two applications of Round Up were applied and then they were "hot gassed" with Methyl Bromide. The seed was applied on Aug. 31 over the top of the old bermuda organic layer.

The cost for the conversion was estimated at \$35,000 in lost revenue, \$25,000 in extra maintenance and seed costs for a total investment of \$60,000 to \$70,000. It was an investment the owner and members were willing to make to try to have bentgrass greens year round.

"I strongly feel it can be done in the right situation," Ehrbar said, having studied all the factors and getting owner and member support. "You have to keep a lot of things in mind and certainly summer conditions is one of them. Our experiences with G-2 during 1997 made us feel like it was a reasonable risk for our club and our situation. It isn't for everybody."

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Ehrbar continued, "Water is the key issue. Dr. Engelke is against syringing as a standard, automatic practice. We did not want to have annoying fans and frequent syringing. It was a consideration to having the bentgrass at all. We are very cautious on our watering and border on the dry side."

When asked if he then tended toward the holistic watering practice of watering deeply and infrequently, Ehrbar responded, "Definitely!"

"We have gone as much as 21-25 days between waterings this winter. During the summer we could only go about four days between waterings. We do some hand-watering on areas that may have irregular soil-mix depths and we check dew patterns for potential dry spots. It does require a good eye and you have to stay on your toes seven days a week."

Ehrbar is acutely aware he has put himself on the hot seat by re-introducing bentgrass in South Florida, but it should be known that Old Marsh did not

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do this on a whim or for bragging rights. It was a long and thoughtful process of finding a grass variety that seemed to fit their membership needs and desires. Bentgrass is definitely not for everyone.

Ehrbar and his staff are still learning every day what it takes to manage this new bentgrass. Each year will bring different conditions and the grass will react differently to those conditions.

"It may look good now, but wait until the third year," some people say. Three years from now Ehrbar may be planting

a new ultradwarf, but for now he has bentgrass greens to manage. The members at Old Marsh understand that this is a calculated gamble, but one they were willing to take, based on their specific situation, and willingness to gamble is a key ingredient every club needs to take into account.

One final word. Whenever a club contemplates making a change in grass varieties, used anywhere on the golf course, the best course of action is to plant several different kinds and grow them for a minimum of one year to get the change of seasons and to see how it reacts to traffic and mowing and the general performance expectations of your particular club. This goes for bermudagrasses as well as any other kind of turf.

If your greens do not have excellent drainage, good sunlight and air circulation, a modern reliable irrigation system, and is not fully staffed, I can guarantee you failure if you try to grow bentgrass in Florida.



Old Marsh 9th hole and clubhouse. Photo by Joel Jackson.