

*This photo from the Coastal Turf Company showing a plug of Champion bermudagrass was taken at the Ultradwarf Forum at the 1999 South Florida Turf Expo. Proper management of this aggressive biomass zone is the key to success for grooming all of the ultradwarf bermudagrasses. Photo by Joel Jackson.*



## Opinion

### Are We Opening the Gates to Paradise or Pandora's Box?

**T**here is a new generation of turfgrasses that have been released for use on golf course putting greens. Most of them have been under real-world maintenance and performance conditions in Florida for only two to three years at most. Are they the answer to the fast greens problems superintendents have faced in the last decade? The answer is yes and no.

I wish I could just say yes and we could all ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after, but with fewer than two dozen courses in the state growing at least three different varieties of the new ultradwarf bermudagrasses, there are a lot of unanswered questions. But even this early on, I think there are some realities that need to be discussed before these grasses get a bum rap for being something they aren't.

The one and only thing I will stipulate to is that these grasses will tolerate a lower cut. They thrive nicely on 1/8 and 1/10 inch cut. Notice I did not say they made for faster greens... only that you can cut them lower. These grasses are denser and that density keeps the ball roll at a medium speed unless you adopt a thorough grooming program. And that is where the misconception of these grasses begins.

Because these grasses require a low height of cut, architects must begin modifying how much they contour the greens or there will be scalping. Yet architects are already specifying these grasses for some of their new

courses without much performance data to go by. That's the first mistake: building in a problem.

If the design and the grass is compatible, then the next area that is overlooked is that of the club's mission and purpose. If it is a low-volume, private club that can close one day per week, then the necessary grooming of these ultradwarfs can be accomplished and provide the expected fast greens performance.

But if a course is a resort or other high-volume venue that must keep the doors open at all times, I don't recommend these new grasses at this time. The putting surface will not be as good as a well-maintained Tifdwarf greens if the necessary verticutting and topdressing can't be performed with regularity.

I have already seen a golf course struggle with performance expectations because they are unwilling to provide closed times. They want that fast putting surface but there is always a group that must be accommodated for tee times. They won't commit to giving the maintenance staff the time to manage the new grass properly. You can buy a Mercedes but if you don't change the oil regularly, don't expect it to perform like the precision machine you thought you bought.

With some of the varieties on the market, it looks like once a year you may have to get very aggressive with your verticutting program during renovation to keep thatch under control. The timing and severity of this process must be factored into the schedule of events of the club and with weather conditions so no one will be surprised during the recovery period.

Performance of these grasses also depends on the precision of the mowing units that must achieve a good

clean cut. It used to be that a good mechanic could tune up a cutting unit with a tournament bedknife and grinder and lapping machine and keep the mowers cutting at 1/8 of an inch for the two-day member-guest tournament or a four-day professional golf event. With these new grasses, mechanics must make sure the mowers can handle .125 inches or lower heights every day.

With a lower growing habit than Tifdwarf, these grasses require even thinner bedknives. Thinner metal means less wear tolerance and faster obsolescence with all the extra topdressing that must be done, which means more money in the budget for reels and bedknives. It is a price that has to be paid for lower-cut greens. And remember: lower cut doesn't necessarily mean faster unless the

other cultural practices are done frequently.

One superintendent who has experienced two of these new grasses has stated that sooner or later everyone will be managing these grasses, that they are the grasses of the future. I won't argue against that declaration except to note that currently the most successful stands of the new ultradwarfs are at private clubs where budgets are more liberal and they have the time — including off-season low play — to manage the turf properly.

These ultradwarfs may be paradise for some courses right now but they may be also be a Pandora's box of problems and disappointments for those courses not quite ready for the requirements that come with them.

JOEL JACKSON, CGCS



*Unintentional bonus of ultradwarf greens! Mole crickets seem to prefer the Tifway 419 collar instead of the Floradwarf putting surface at the Legends Course at the Orange Lake Resort in Kissimmee. Photo by Joel Jackson.*

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