Local Hero

Florida superintendent hails homegrown turf for successful greens renovation

Problem
They looked good, they played well, but ... the greens at Lake Region Yacht & CC were in bad shape and in need of renovation.

Solution
FloraDwarf, a dense and fine-textured creeping turfgrass developed at the University of Florida. "Our greens turned out flawlessly," says superintendent R. Alan Puckett.

Nobody was blaming the golf course greens at Lake Region Yacht & CC for putting games gone awry. In fact, most members at the Winter Haven, Fla., course believed the greens were in excellent shape.

But superintendent R. Alan Puckett discovered that the greens, despite their vivid and vigorous appearance, were diseased and contaminated. He knew the greens would eventually have to be restored.

The problem
The back-nine greens were rebuilt in 1984; the front nine were rebuilt in 1987. Problems began in 1984, when the backside greens grew in contaminated. Since the greens were renovated three years later on the frontside, Puckett and his crew had to maintain them differently, especially when verticutting.

"It was like maintaining two different entities," he says.

The backside greens contained mosaic circles. Puckett and his crew could manage the diseased spots, but only to a point.

"People didn't know we were having problems," Puckett says. "They thought the greens were fine. But puttability, aesthetics and agronomics are different."

Puckett noticed the developing problem when he came to Lake Region in 1990. He also noticed that the frontside greens were grown in with better-quality Canadian peat moss, compared to the backside greens which were grown in with Florida peat moss.

The greens deteriorated even more over time, especially in the winter during overseeding.

"The matted and contaminated spots would choke out the overseed," Puckett says, adding that areas on the greens became bare. "You couldn't keep a consistent surface. That was the final straw."

Puckett began to lobby for the greens renovation in 1995, but he had to convince his superiors and members that it was necessary. Besides not being able to see the problems with the greens, they believed the greens needed to be refurbished every 20 years, not every 12 years.

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Puckett knew the renovation would be difficult to oversee. But Puckett told them.

Puckett did what he could to maintain the greens and continued to campaign. His superiors finally consented to the project in the spring of 1998.

But there was another problem: cash flow. Because of a $1.6 million clubhouse renovation, Puckett had about $220,000 to spend on a greens renovation, which can cost up to $350,000.

Puckett had to run like an Olympic sprinter to get the project done quickly. His mission? Get the greens done on the double so the course wouldn't be shut down for long.

The solution
Puckett studied various turfgrasses and narrowed the field to only certified grasses. He considered Tifdwarf, a nearly 30-year-old grass.

"I would have used it, and it would have been fine," Puckett admits. "But I didn't want to be that old course with that old grass six years down the road. It was a personal fear."

Puckett also considered Champion, a dense, ultra-dwarf bermudagrass. But in the end, he chose the homegrown FloraDwarf, a nearly 30-year-old grass.

"It was a phenomenal effort," Puckett says. "Not surprisingly, Puckett says he can cut FloraDwarf lower than Tifdwarf without damaging it. He also didn't have any overseeding problems last winter. "FloraDwarf is not as difficult to manage as I thought," he says.

He purchased the FloraDwarf from Greg Norman Turf in Avon Park, Fla. "Hands down, it's one of the cleanest fields there is," Puckett says.

For his efforts, Puckett received a bonus and a plaque. He beams when he talks about the renovation, an obvious career highlight.

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