Timing is Everything

Transitional ryegrass finds its place in the overseeding market

Okeeheelee GC in West Palm Beach, Fla., traditionally had problems with its bermudagrass fairways thinning every winter because of high traffic, dry weather and other environmental factors.

Paul Hickman, vice president of One Source Landscape and Golf Services, whose firm maintains the course, feared that if the fairways were overseeded with perennial ryegrass — which many Southern courses use to overseed fairways, tees and roughs — its inbred resistance to heat would cause it to survive longer into the spring and early summer than he wanted. “That means a bad transition, with thin turf or no turf in the areas where the ryegrass has gotten so strong that bermudagrass is shaded out,” Hickman explains.

But last fall Hickman overseeded with a transitional ryegrass from Pickseed West called Transist 2200. “The biggest advantage of using it was its quick establishment, and that it didn’t tolerate the heat as well as perennial ryegrasses,” Hickman says. “It did just what we wanted it to. It colored the fairways, gave us some density and died out at the right time of the year.”

Transitional ryegrass, also called intermediate ryegrass, is a cross between perennial and annual ryegrass, according to Pickseed West General Manager Jerry Pepin, whose company is selling “millions of pounds” of intermediate ryegrass annually. Its darker-green color and finer-leaf texture (compared to annual ryegrass) approaches that of perennial ryegrass. But it has an annual ryegrass growth habit, germinating quickly in the fall and dying off earlier in the spring when warmer weather arrives, allowing the awakening bermudagrass to take over. Just how early it dies off depends on weather and management practices.

Pickseed West has undertaken significant research and recently obtained patents on its breeding process and transitional ryegrass varieties, Pepin says. It is marketing three brands: Transist, Transist 2200 and Transeze. To soften the springtime transition from rye-

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grass to bermudagrass, these improved inter-
mediates can be blended with some perennial
ryegrass to keep the turf green until the
bermudagrass resumes active growth.

Other intermediates include Pennington
Seed’s Professional Select QT (Quicker Trans-
ition) and Turf Merchants’ Froghair. Seed Re-
search of Oregon (SRO) is experimenting with
its own transitional varieties and plans to mar-
ket Pickseed’s products as well, according to
SRO Research Director Leah Brilman.

Certified superintendent Patrick Burgess,
project manager for recreation centers at Sun
City West’s seven courses outside Phoenix, says
he first heard about Pickseed’s transitional
ryegrasses four years ago.

“The reason to change over was mainly be-
because more of our residents are living here year
round,” he says. “They can’t tolerate hard trans-
sitions in the summer. This is a tool I’m using to
try to alleviate some of those summer problems.”

Burgess overseeds the transitional ryes on
the tees, fairways and roughs.

“We do our normal bermudagrass prepara-
tion in the fall to make sure the seed gets down
into the soil by verticutting and lowering mow-
ing heights,” he says. “We start overseeding Sept.
23 for the first four courses and then reopen them
Oct. 14. Then we close the last three and over-
seed them. So we’re overseeding for six weeks
here. We always have to have some courses open.”

John Hoffman, superintendent of golf course
and common grounds at Heritage Springs Golf
and CC in New Port Richey, Fla., says he first
used Pickseed West’s Transist in his 18-hole
course in 2000.

“We overseed in early November,” he adds.
“We used 325 pounds per acre on fairways and
roughs last year. We had germination in five
days and mowed 14 days after germination.”

Pepin says superintendents can use any
traditional seeding method from drop spread-
ers to air seeders. The water, mowing and fer-
tilization requirements are the same as with
perennial ryegrass.

Once established, transitional ryegrass man-
agement practices are the same as for perenni-
als, according to Russ Nicholson, national sales
manager for Pennington Seed. “The original
transitional grasses [which were first developed
in the early 1980s] had to be mowed more, but
the new ones don’t need to be,” he says.

In addition to their main attribute of giving
way quickly to the underlying warm-season
grain in the spring, transitional ryegrasses also
germinate exceptionally fast in the fall. With
warm soil and adequate moisture, they germi-
nate in five to seven days, notes Pepin, and at
temperatures ranging from as low as 22 degrees
F to as high as 90 degrees F; adds Heritage
Springs’ Hoffman. They are durable, standing
up to the wear and tear of an average 220 rounds
a day at 6,100-yard Heritage Springs.

But, when choosing whether to overseed
with transitional or perennial ryegrass, there are
those who question whether intermediate rye-
grass’s major attribute — a quicker spring-
time transition — is worth what most agree is,
at least, a slightly inferior color and texture than
the best perennial ryegrasses.

“With the intermediates, you are giving up
color and texture for a week to 10 days of ear-
lier transition,” says Steve Tubbs, president of
Turf Merchants, who believes the attention
being paid to transitional ryegrasses represents
a fad rather than a trend. “You also have to
mow them more often. The last few years, perennial ryegrass has been so inexpensive, why would you give up a whole winter of beautiful, dense dark-green fairways to get a week's earlier transition? Most superintendents know how to get perennial ryegrass to transition out [more quickly], so you're giving up a lot of aesthetics for a little bit of transitional time."

Burgess says he'll test transitional ryegrasses for a couple more years before deciding whether to stay with them or go back to perennials at Sun City West.

"In the spring, when it starts to warm again, they [transitional] tend to get a flush of growth, especially if you have been applying a lot of nitrogen throughout the winter," he says. "That's the type of thing I learned last year that we'll manage a little differently this year.

"There's a learning curve," Burgess adds. "You can't treat it like perennial. It's definitely a different type of management."

While viewed mainly as a Southern overseeding grass, transitional ryes also have a potential Northern application as a nurse grass.

"You might mix bluegrass and fine fescue with one of these transitional ryegrasses," Pepin says. "You get a quick, early stand of transitional ryegrass. When it dies off, you get the bluegrass and fine fescue remaining, which is what you probably wanted anyway. Bluegrass takes three weeks to get any kind of ground cover at all. People don't want to wait that long, so it is traditionally mixed with perennial ryegrass."

"But then growers may be stuck with the perennial ryegrass forever. The transitional rye-grasses give you a quick stand, provide erosion control, but die off within a year, leaving you with the bluegrass and fine fescue you wanted."

Having a secondary Northern market should help transitional ryegrasses maintain their place in the seed supply arena, according to SRO's Brillman. "If one market doesn't take all the seed, it's good to have another place you can put it," she says.

Blais is a free-lance writer from North Yarmouth, Maine.

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