

New Fairways for Westwood Country Club

Walter Montross' future is green

by Betty Ford

Under the direction and watchful eye of superintendent Walter Montross, the Westwood Country Club in Vienna, Va. now sports 18 new bentgrass fairways. In a surprisingly short time span, the club's primarily poa annua fairways were transformed into bentgrass turf.

Walter, who started at Westwood in April, 1990, came with a specific plan to transform

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the fairways. "One of the pressing problems the club had was failure of fairway turf," he says, "predominately because they were of poa annua that had been cultivated for many years. I became convinced from some work I had done at Springfield that bentgrass was a viable option for this area. We put together a package and I, personally, chose that option and convinced the club that was the way to go about it. Because we were 95 percent poa and because the fairways had not been renovated in the last 20 years, the feeling was we needed to completely eliminate everything that was there. The club accepted the proposal."

"In August of last year we sprayed the fairways with Roundup and killed everything. In early September we completely rolled them over—with heavy aeration and drill seeding. We seeded in Penlinks bentgrass. We never closed the golf course with the exception of the day we sprayed and then the day we began renovation. We reopened the fairways 37 days later to play.

They just got better and better as time went on."

"Yet," says Walter, "we are not where we need to be. My feeling is we still have a year to a year and a half to get the fairways up to what I would call bentgrass fairways."

Three factors have presented challenges to Walter and made progress just a bit slower than he would have liked: the single-row irrigation system at Westwood; the fact that the fairways had been predominately poa annua; and good old Mid-Atlantic weather conditions.

Walter began his program hoping that at the end of last year "we would be 60 to 70 percent bent and 30 to 40 poa." The single-row system has caused an interesting phenomenon. "We had tremendous germination of bent in the middle of the fairways and less on the edges where watering was not as efficient. We eventually had to do rollerbasing on the edges to get them to come in.

Really what happened was we achieved the 60 bent, 40 poa—but it was about 80 to 90 percent bent in the middle, and about 50/50 on the edges. So we knew that going into this year we were weak on the edges and there was a lot of poa back out there, although it looked very impressive. The new fairways looked very impressive as to turf density and esthetics. We just had a lot more poa than we'd hoped for."

The club is aware that this irrigation system needs to be modified. Notes Walter, "We are going to put in a new system in the next couple of years and are now trying to forecast the cost of that for long-range planning."

The second hindrance—the

large amount of poa in the fairways—has also complicated matters. "Poa is a prolific producer of seed, and the seed that goes into the ground is viable for 20 years or more so that if you've had a heavy crop of it and it has dropped seed it will re-invade if management stops. There is enough viable seed in the ground right now that no matter what program I'm on, we will always have it as a possible re-invading grass. So, we've done a lot of playing around with various chemical programs this year. We've done some growth retardant work using everybody's product and comparing one to the other. We're going to be doing

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some Progress work this fall. Unfortunately, this herbicide's mode of action also makes the bent susceptible to it, so it's a bit hairy. We're going to experiment with it in small areas. We need to come up with something in the next couple of years that will attack poa. The bottom line is, we're looking at everything and anything."

Finally, weather in the Mid-Atlantic causes no end of headaches for turf professionals. It is one of the most difficult areas in the whole country to grow grass. "We are not one season or the other," notes Walter. "We can have hotter summers than the entire east coast, yet we could turn around this winter and have

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temperatures comparable to upstate New York, Vermont, or Maine. Rainfall is sporadic—from intense thunderstorms to long periods without rain. One of my professors called this 'the armpit of turf growing in the United States.'"

Specifically, for Westwood's new fairways, weather has made progress difficult. At the time they seeded last September, conditions were dry—"ideal for us to germinate grass under our regime," says Walter. However, October was very wet, allowing the poa to be competitive. Then, this summer has seen intensive heat. "We can survive 60 days of 90 degree weather. What kills us is when it's hot from May 1 all the

way through. We've had over 30 days of 90 degrees and a couple of 100 degree days." Yet, declares Walter, "My experience has been that the bent is equally tolerant of the heat, with no more disease pressures and no more insect pressures, than ryegrass. This summer just hasn't been a fair test."

Does Walter recommend this program? This is not a program for everyone. It takes commitment of the entire club. While initial installation cost is modest—"our total cost for installing these fairways was less than "\$30,000—maintenance requires a substantial budget. Notes Walter, "You must have a good irrigation budget. A club that's on a low-level budget cannot maintain bentgrass fairways."

It is not, however, the irrigation alone that is costly. Bentgrass requires more maintenance and renovation. It is not a grass that tolerates heavy thatch conditions and Walter plans aerification about three times a year. In addition, bentgrass requires more fungicides—more than the warm-season turfs. "But," says Walter, "I have seen little more disease pressure on the bent than I would have on the rye."

Nor is this a program for a public course. "This is not a management program that fits a public golf course at all." Although the private clubs have experienced higher levels of play than ever this year (the economy is down and people are staying home), and this regime is still doing well under the added stress,

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this would not suit the publics. "If I were at a public course, I would not be mowing fairways at 1/2" and I would want a warm-season turfgrass. We take things a little closer to the edge than the public courses. There is more emphasis on keeping greens speeds up and keeping fairways tight and dry."

For those who are presently mowing light, for those willing to make the commitment, and "especially if you have been growing ryegrass—drilling rye in and trying to reduce poa—this program would be a piece of cake. I can guarantee that under the right conditions, you could redo your fairways and be back in play in 30 days with 80 to 90 percent bent fairways."

Although Walter's new

fairways are now under an early renovation, he knows that in a matter of a few days and with some much-needed rain, they will bounce back quickly. Furthermore, he's looking forward to October and cool weather when bentgrass really shines. "All indications are that everyone is pleased with what we've done. The playing surface has been magnificent."

It's just that blankety blank poa annua!

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