



These fairways were recently regrassed with Latitude 36 bermudagrass. Although this warm-season grass was bred to survive colder temperatures, it will still perform differently than a cool-season grass like bentgrass.

WHAT IS THIS STUFF?

BY ELLIOTT DOWLING | AGRONOMIST, NORTHEAST REGION

One of the most enjoyable parts of golf is being able to play different courses around the world. Playing a course in Texas where the winds seem constant presents a different challenge than a course built on the rolling terrain of Pennsylvania. Despite the obvious differences between these golf courses, comparing their playing conditions is risky business because comparisons are often made without a full understanding of what makes each situation unique. To most people, grass is grass and there is not much difference between one grass and another. It's easy to understand this perception, but it makes a golf course superintendent's job more difficult because reality is far more complex. So, how different could one grass be from another?

At the surface, most grasses appear to be very similar. However, when compared closely, there are important differences that make some grasses better than others depending on the situation.

Decades of USGA-funded research have led to the creation of more than 30 new grasses each bred for very specific traits. Advancements in breeding grasses continue to be vital for the golf industry. Golf facilities are now able to choose grasses based on important criteria such as disease resistance, drought, heat or cold tolerance and the ability to withstand heavy traffic. But as more golf courses plant new and improved grasses, unfair comparisons of golf courses can develop by those that may not realize they are playing on a different grasses.

Depending on your location, or where you choose to play most of your golf, the grasses you play on can vary greatly from other parts of the country. This seems intuitive, but the concept becomes less intuitive when we encounter different grasses on courses that are just a few miles away from one another.

Thanks to turf breeding programs, grasses are now available to suit almost any situation. The specialization of grasses is most evident in the transition zone, which includes areas of the U.S. that experience hot, humid summers and relatively cold winters. Because of the seasonal weather extremes, both cool- and warm-season grasses can provide good playing surfaces in the transition zone. You could be playing on a bermudagrass or zoysiagrass fairway at one course and then a bentgrass fairway at a different course just down the road. Each grass could be well-suited to its specific location, but they will look and play very differently throughout the year.

Consequently, trying to compare playing conditions and turf appearance at the two golf courses is simply unfair. The course with bermudagrass fairways may have healthy, rapidly growing grass in summer and the turf may go completely dormant in winter, losing most of its color. The course with bentgrass fairways may struggle during a hot summer, but it may be in great condition during early spring and late into the fall. Which grasses are appropriate for each facility will depend on a wide range of factors including the local environment, maintenance budget and golfer preferences.

Before comparisons are made, it is important to understand what exactly is being compared. Wondering why one course doesn't look or play like another is a valid question, but it should be posed as an investigative question rather than a criticism of agronomic programs and practices. If you like the playing conditions of a neighboring course, it may be worthwhile to ask if they have made any grass changes that have allowed them to improve playing conditions in their unique environment.