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Check the soil and check the sward when picking turf suitable for the golf course, recommends TIM FELL

Of the many factors that are used to describe quality in cultivated turf for greens, two are by far and away the most important; soil type and cultivar.

The main advantage of using turf instead of seed is to get the greens open for play earlier. Why, then, jeopardise the continuous use of those greens by laying turf grown on unsuitable soil? I was on a golf course the other day to look at some problem greens. They had been turfed exactly 12 months before, but I could lift any turf cleanly from the surface. With a resemblance closer to slabs of butter than turf, it's not surprising that the grass was struggling. Although this was an extreme case it does highlight the need to buy turf that is grown on soil that comes as close as possible to the specification used for the underlying rootzone. This means growing turf on sandy soils with very low levels of silt and clay.

The consequences of using turf grown on soil containing a high percentage of fine particles are disastrous. What happens is that, under heavy wear and wet conditions, the fine particles migrate into the air spaces and block off the natural drainage channels. Rain and irrigation water cannot get down to the underlying drains, and the turf stays wet and spongy. In dry conditions the soil sets hard, making it virtually impossible to hold an approach shot on the green. The only recourse is this case is a prolonged period of intense aeration, hollow coring, and top dressing with the proper rootzone mixture.

The maxim 'You get what you pay for' is pretty accurate when it comes to cultivated sportsturf. But one exception that proves the rule is the considerably higher price for one particular greens turf on the market today. Particularly when that turf includes a cultivar of chewings fescue (80% of the seeds mixture) that was dropped from the STRI Merit Lists years ago. Why, you may ask, does the grower use this cultivar? The answer is that it is tolerant of a total herbicide that knocks out annual meadow grass. This is meant to be the justification for the high price.

My feeling is that growing turf for greens should be approached in a different way. First, choose the cultivars that are most likely to meet the demands required of them on golf greens. One of the ways of doing this is by selecting from the STRI Merit Lists. The STRI cultivar trials, despite some criticism, do compare all the new and improved varieties coming from the breeders, and provide an invaluable reference. Many cultivars on the lists today are huge improvements on those appearing ten years ago, and are likely to perform better in today's golf greens. Second, control annual meadow grass by a planned programme of selective herbicide applications at reduced rates. This is very effective if you know what you're doing.

The question of which type of turf to use for tees is an interesting one. In my view there is little doubt that the use of dwarf perennial ryegrass in the mixture adds enormously to its wear tolerance. As such, I would recommend it for use on pay-as-you-play courses, or any course with heavy usage. Some of the newer cultivars of amenity ryegrass coming from the Dutch breeders look very exciting. With finer and finer leaves, and compact growth habits capable of thriving under lower mowing heights, they are going to be difficult to beat.

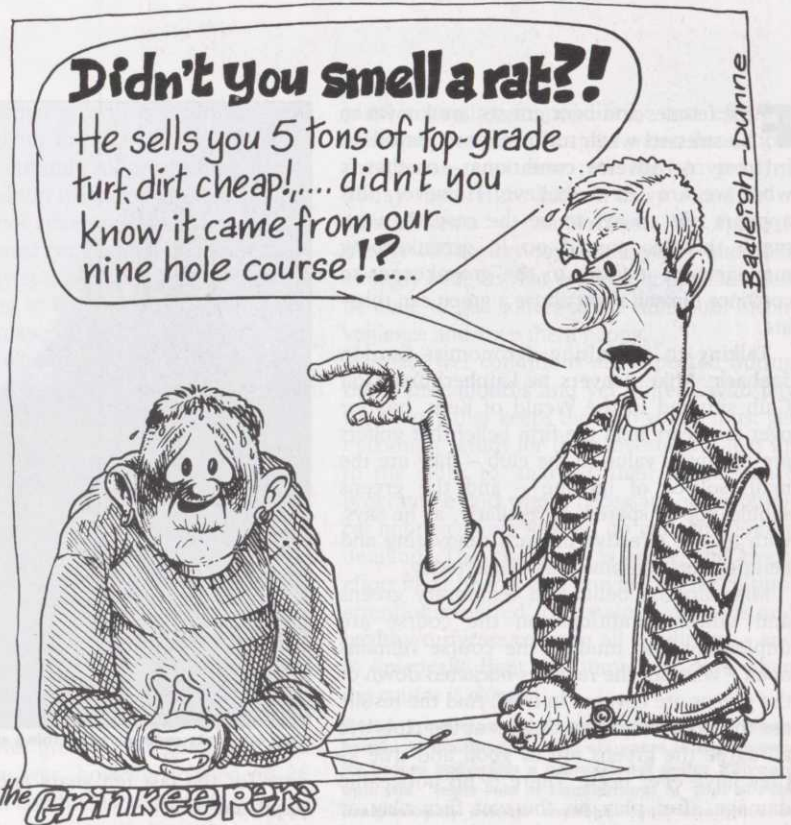
But many clubs prefer to use turf without ryegrass for their tees. I have become a convert to smooth stalked meadow grass

'em

in fescue/bent mixtures since the introduction of Limousine. Before Limousine, smooth stalked meadow grass stood out like a sore thumb and looked rather ugly. But the finer, lighter-green leaves of Limousine have changed all that, to give an attractive, relatively hard-wearing, sward. It's probably not a good idea, however, to use smooth stalked meadow grass in the turf for green aprons because it does tend to have a drag effect on a rolling ball.

The best way of making sure of the quality of any turf is to go and see it being grown and harvested in the nurseries. You'll soon get a good idea of how much attention is paid to detail. However, in practice, lack of time prevents many people from making the trip. In that case, a sample is the next best thing, but make sure you keep it in good condition so that it can be compared against subsequent deliveries. If you're not satisfied that the delivery matches up to the sample, send the load back where it came from.

■ The author, Tim Fell, is managing director of Tillers Turf Company Limited.



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