



Tall Fescue in Your Future

Turf-Type Tall Fescue! Back in the 80s we started to receive reports that Tall Fescue had been improved to a point that it would not completely embarrass us as professional turf managers. Reports of Turf-type tall fescue were highly exaggerated. The versions we were sold twenty years ago were better than the predecessor Kentucky-31, but not of a quality that would be encouraging enough for anyone to want to use on a golf course. We all know Kentucky-31. A tough as nails tall fescue, which resembles a green blooming onion more than anything else. It is clumpy and bunchy and does not form a sod that anyone could ever mistake for good. However, it had its high points. Tall fescue as a rule is drought tolerant, heat tolerant, shade tolerant, and wear resistant. It just looked horrible. Notice the past tense in that previous sentence. We now have real Turf-Type Tall Fescue!



Tall Fescue research

You may have noticed ads in recent issues of the fine publications that cruise over your desk for more and more tall fescue. The reason for this is that they are really good. REALLY GOOD! Not take out your fairways and convert them to tall fescue good, but good, none the less. They are definitely good enough to use in your rough, especially under trees and in other low maintenance areas. For years a utility grass or forage grass, tall fescue now has many applications that can be exploited to your advantage on a golf course.

I first encountered these new varieties in Nebraska six years ago. On a tour of the University of Nebraska turf research facility in Mead, I was directed to a section of plots and asked to identify the grass. I knew Terry Riordan was trying to put one over on me. It looked like bluegrass from eye level looking down, but upon closer inspection I could tell it was tall fescue (no distinct mid-vein). It really looked good. It was mowed close and formed a dense, dark green stand of turf. What makes these turf-type cultivars so good? Well to be honest they look more like Kentucky bluegrass and have some great attributes that KBG does not. They have a thinner blade than in the past. Not as thin as the improved varieties of KBG but as thin as the old school, Marion or Park varieties. They do not look clumpy. They form a uniform surface that I can envision hitting a golf ball off of. Some of the newest varieties of tall fescue actually claim to have rhizomes. Barenbrug Seed Company has a product that they are touting as Rhizomatous Tall Fescue or RTF. Many other companies as well are staking the claim that they have discovered or developed rhizomes in their tall fescues. I will not debate this point because it does not matter to me or you. What matters is whether it will form a tight full turf. It will.

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Tall Fescue breeding

The greatest test for the strength of a grass is to harvest it as sod. Tall fescue was being harvested as sod last year in Chicago with no netting. Anyone who attended the Illinois Turf Foundation's Field Day at the Midwest Golf House in September had the opportunity to see some transplanted tall fescue sod first hand. It was impressive. Laid not many days prior to the event, it was rooting into the soil on that beautiful day. If you did not get a chance to see it that day, it is still there. You may have to ask where it is to find it. You will notice it this time of year as the best looking section of rough left of the first hole of the Sunshine Course.

With its resistance to heat and drought, tall fescue is well suited to the conditions that exist around bunkers.

Why am I selling you so hard on the tall fescue? Well, I think it is good. I think it is good for the industry and good for our public image. Tall fescue roots deeper than most other turfgrass. This allows it to draw water out of the soil that could not be reached by other grasses. Less irrigation is needed to sustain the turf because of this attribute. It can look good with less fertility than Kentucky bluegrass. It can grow well in the shade. At this point it appears to be susceptible to fewer diseases and insect pests than Kentucky bluegrass in our area. So, less pesticide should be needed to maintain this grass. As I mentioned before it is wear tolerant. Why not use it at the end of your cart paths? You know those areas that you are constantly resodding or extending with more gravel or paving. It also germinates quickly, so if any wear begins to show you can over-seed the area and expect quick results. How wear tolerant is it? It has been used with success on football fields in this area, and it is the new grass of choice for Grant Park in downtown Chicago. If it can handle the throngs from the Taste of Chicago, Blues Fest, the Air and Water Show, etc... it can probably handle your course.

Getting back to this shade tolerance, tall fescue is not as shade tolerant as fine fescue or as *Poa supina* but it is better than Kentucky bluegrass and looks more like Kentucky bluegrass than any other choice. Tall fescue may have a place in those areas that just will not sustain other grasses due to low light. Laying tall fescue sod will increase the chance of out competing some of those pesky weeds, like knotweed, that seem to proliferate in these areas.

Where else can I use this miracle grass you ask? No-mow areas seem to be particularly well suited for this turf. It forms a tight community that will decrease weed competition and actually has a nice appearance when allowed to grow tall and flower. The blades will give way to their own weight and bow in a graceful arch. It looks like I think a no-mow area should look, uninviting and treacherous. However, the chance of finding and playing a ball successfully out of this area would be low. As a side note

some of your counterparts are actually investigating the use of tall fescue as an ornamental ground cover in landscape plantings.



Tall Fescue at rough height

How about bunker faces? With its resistance to heat and drought, tall fescue is well suited to the conditions that exist around bunkers. This may reduce your need for irrigation on these areas. Less water on the bunker faces means more water on those *Poa greens* when supplies run short.

Tall fescue has been used in areas to our south for years because Kentucky bluegrass can not withstand the heat that is present in the summer. Now, with the advent of these improved varieties, we are seeing a chance to reap the benefits of this oft disregarded grass and not having to sacrifice appearance or playability. There are many new varieties that can be purchased that have been very successful in the Chicago area.

There has to be a down side. There is a downside to everything. One of the down sides of tall fescue is that the appearance is not to the level of Kentucky bluegrasses yet. In addition, it doesn't repair itself as quickly when damaged. However it takes much more to damage it. There is also some concern with over wintering. Tall fescue has a reputation for not successfully completing the first winter after a fall seeding. This can be easily overcome by installing tall fescue sod or trying a spring or late summer seeding. Established tall fescue will definitely over winter in northern Illinois as can be demonstrated on many area lawns. As with

any new development it will take a few growing seasons before all of the kinks are worked out. Be ahead of the curve and start trying some different things now.



Tall Fescue rhizome

There are many options in the market for new grasses and many different directions you can take to fill the niches that exist on your golf course. When selecting grasses, think

about the long term implications of your choices as well as the perception that you are creating. Are you selecting grasses that are environmentally friendly as well as functional or have aesthetics completely taken over your selection process? In a day when everything that takes place on your property is monitored by one faction or another, casting yourself in the best possible light is extremely important. Choosing a grass such as tall fescue can be one of your tools in defending your craft. Recent reports of turf-type tall fescue are not highly exaggerated. Try some on your course to see where it may be applicable before your competition beats you to it.

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