

CAN YOU BUILD A SNOWMAN IN SOUTH FLORIDA?

What About Bentgrass Greens in Bermudagrass Territory?

By Irene Jones

Yes, of course you can build a snowman in Florida. It would require the expense of a special work area, such as a large walk-in freezer, some dedicated, hard working individuals and some man made snow.

But would "Frosty" thrive if we placed him out on a South Florida green? A whole lot of Golf Course Superintendents in South Florida view the management of pure bentgrass greens on their courses in much the same way.

According to A.E. Dudeck, Professor, Turfgrass Science at The University of Florida, "Florida is bermudagrass territory. Most turfgrass specialists who have been well schooled in the climatic zones of turfgrass adaptation know that bentgrass, as a cool season turfgrass, is adapted to the cool, humid regions of the world — not to Florida."

I attended a day-long seminar on the use of bentgrass greens in Florida, at JDM Country Club, located in Palm Beach Gardens on October 8, 1987. The moderator for all topics of this seminar was Max Brown, Ph.D., a leading turf expert and consultant in the south east. Panelists were made up of eight well respected golf course superintendents; while the eleven turf specialists on the program looked like a "who's who" list of turf experts from across the U.S. Seminar Co-ordinator was Tom Burrows, Director of Education, Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association, Turtle Creek Club, Tequesta. And helping to bring it all about was Marie Roberts, Secretary, FGCSA.

The importance and the interest associated with bentgrass use in Florida was very much in evidence by the packed meeting room, with 107 persons, mostly superintendents in attendance.

Joe Duich, Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University, commented that bentgrass problems carry over on Saturday and Sunday. "One or two men can not grow bent, it will take a team. No irrigation system has been proven to water bent. It has to be hand-watered." Because I am the wife of a golf course superintendent, statements such as this bring to mind visions of golf course superintendents all tucked into their beds, right beside their bentgrass greens. Seriously though, it is hard enough to work with a factor as powerful and changeable as Mother Nature, without bringing into a region a type of turfgrass that she does not naturally put Her blessings on.

Robert Dunn, Ph.D., University of Florida, spoke about the physiological aspect of nematodes on bentgrass. "Sting nematodes attack bentgrass, their population accelerates as the temperature goes up." So this tells us that if nematodes are a problem on a course, bentgrass is not a good choice. At this point I could just imagine the entire nematode population in South Florida licking their chops as they discussed which course they were going to dine at tonight.

I DO NOT THINK WE HAVE A NEED FOR BENTGRASS IN SOUTH FLORIDA WHERE BERMUDAGRASS DOES SO WELL, AT REASONABLE COST.

Carl McKinney, J.D.M. CC

Disease problems are severe on bentgrass according to Joe Vargas, Jr., Ph.D., Michigan State University. "Root rot organisms require four times the amount of chemicals needed to treat foliar organisms. The root knot nematode is a big fan of bentgrass." Just think about what this could do to your annual budget in the area of dollars spent on chemicals?

"The well drained rootzones which are required for bentgrass will bring about increased leaching of nutrients and pesticides into Florida's shallow ground water table. Increased water needs for frequent syringing place greater demands on an already limited water supply. **ALTHOUGH MONEY MAY BE NO OBJECT ON MANY OF FLORIDA'S GOLF COURSES**, the increased use of fungicides for disease control on bentgrass greens should be reason alone for abandoning such a practice." Directly quoted in a letter to the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association from A.E. Dudeck, Professor, Turfgrass Science at The University of Florida.

Again speaking as the wife of a golf course superintendent, I can not even in my wildest dream, imagine my husband (or any other experienced, well respected golf course superintendent) handing their budget committee chairman, or their greens committee chairman, a budget which increased at least four times the amount of last year's budget, in the areas of chemicals, fertilizer and labor costs. It has been reported that the use of fungi-

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cides are being used every 3-5 days on courses with bent; in addition to the cost, this practice will cause immune diseases in the plant.

The golf course superintendent/manager has a responsibility to maintain his course at the highest standard possible within his budget. He also has the responsibility to keep his club officials informed and knowledgeable when it comes to unreasonable expenses. To help ensure that the very best standards for a golf course be examined, it may be a good decision to have a turfgrass expert attend a Board Meeting. This would allow members to question and examine the issue first hand.

And in the case of pure bentgrass greens, can clubs afford to burden their golf course superintendent/managers with growing and maintaining a cool season turfgrass that Mother Nature herself is generally opposed to in South Florida? Remember that we can not change the weather, no matter how hard we try, or how much we are willing to pay.

Will environmental groups and Florida's water management districts have anything to say about the increased pesticide use which the experts and the experienced superintendents tell us must happen when this cool season turfgrass is grown in the warm, moist region of South Florida? How about the increased leaching of nutrients and pesticides into Florida's shallow ground water table? And how about increased water needs for the frequent syringing which bent requires in our area? Since you already know the answers to these questions I do not have to say anymore.

I DO NOT THINK MONEY CAN BUY YEAR ROUND, CONSISTENT BENT GREENS.

**George Cavanaugh,
Bear Lakes C.C.**

THE SECOND PART OF THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS A LOT OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THE REAL EXPERTS WHO ARE ON THE FRONT-LINE OF THIS CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE — THE GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT/MANAGER:

The Florida Green asked the following six questions to a field of 15 Florida Golf Course Supers. Here are the questions, a breakdown on the responses, along with direct quotes from our experts.

QUESTION: Is your club being affected by the current bentgrass controversy?

ANSWER: *James Branstrom, CGCS, Palm Beach Polo & Country Club.* "Yes, we hold bent throughout the year because the owners want it."

ANSWER: *Tom Werner, The Loxahatchee Club.* "We have had 100% bentgrass greens since 1984. Most likely we are part of the reason the controversy continues."

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BREAKDOWN: YES - 7; NO - 8

QUESTION: What are your thoughts on bentgrass in Florida, as an annual or perennial?

ANSWER: *Bill Whitaker, CGCS, Seminole Golf Club.* "Bentgrass is a superior playing surface, when properly managed. Tifdwarf will out-perform any bent available today."

ANSWER: *Richard C. Blake, CGCS, President, FGCSA, Bokaire Country Club.* "As an annual only if you have well drained greens, good irrigation system, walk greens mowers, an adequate budget, can control the traffic on greens, can close the course to play when flooded, etc. . . ."

BREAKDOWN: Annual only - 12; Would not even consider it - 1; Would consider only Tifdwarf - 1; Perennial - 1

QUESTION: Do you agree with having pure bentgrass greens in Florida; such as The Loxahatchee Club?

ANSWER: *Mark Jarrell, Palm Beach National Golf & Country Club.* "I would not want to be the superintendent at a course with pure bentgrass greens. However, I do enjoy playing bentgrass when I visit a course that has it."

ANSWER: *Jim Watkins, Frenchman's Creek Golf Club.* "No!! The physiological requirements of bentgrass are not supplied by Mother Nature in South Florida during our summer months. I believe "EGO" has created the pure bentgrass attempts over common sense!!"

ANSWER: *Kevin Downing, CGCS, Mariner Sands Country Club.* "Yes, if:
A. Willing to pay price/well paid assistants
B. Limit play
C. Be prepared to put in Tifdwarf at later date"

BREAKDOWN: NO - 9; YES - 2; Only if certain conditions are met - 4

QUESTION: Do you feel that Florida clubs can afford the maintenance expense of permanent bentgrass greens?

ANSWER: *Mark Hampton, Golf Course Manager, Wyndemere Country Club.* Before a decision is reached on justifying the cost of maintaining permanent bentgrass greens, a full understanding of the subject by the decision-makers is imperative. In recent cases, the decision has been based on someone's wants, not sound agronomic/financial principles. In the
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field, examples have shown that these wants have been forced into situations not conducive to dollar-value results.

ANSWER: *James Branstrom, CGCS, Palm Beach Polo & Country Club.* "Some of the very exclusive clubs can, but this is only 5% of the population. I do not know if these exclusive clubs can afford the superintendent's salary, because they should be paid well.

ANSWER: *George W. Cavanaugh, Golf Course Manager, Bear Lakes Country Club.* "Yes, but I do not think money can buy, year round, consistent bent greens.

BREAKDOWN: NO - 9; YES - 4; If specific clubs are willing to accept the expense - 1; Less than 30 clubs in state - 1

QUESTION: If a heat & humidity tolerant bentgrass is developed would you then be in favor of pure bentgrass greens in Florida?

ANSWER: *Daniel L. Hall, Jr., CGCS, Sunbelt Turf Management.* "Only if properly budgeted and members are informed and KEPT INFORMED.

ANSWER: *Cecil Johnson, Avila Golf & Country Club.* "Yes. If conditioning of golf courses had been totally acceptable 20 years ago, we would not have seen any improvement in the past 20 years.

ANSWER: *Carl McKinney, J.D.M. Country Club.* "I do not think we have a need for bentgrass in South Florida where bermudagrass does so well, at reasonable cost.

BREAKDOWN: NO - 2; YES - 5; Possible, wait and see attitude - 6; Stick to improving bermudagrass - 2

QUESTION: Do you feel the expense of overseeding in *SOUTH FLORIDA* is justified?

ANSWER: *Michael J. Perham, CGCS Project Agronomist, The Moorings Club.* "No, but in my situation, being associated with a real estate development, they do not want to take a chance on off color greens in the prime selling months,"

ANSWER: *David C. Holler, CGCS, Quail Ridge Country Club.* "Yes I do! With the type of membership I have (80% go north for the summer) they want to have green grass through the winter and I feel they are willing to pay for it."

ANSWER: *Scott Wahlin, Grounds Manager, Miami Lakes Inn, Athletic Club, Golf Resort.*

"Usually not (no). However, I have seen clubs in South Florida who, in my opinion, should overseed. These clubs had several contaminated greens, very low budgets, and some members with low expectations. The majority of their play occurs in the winter. They chose to redo their greens with low standards, (low bid, fudge on recommendations, etc.). Would it not be better to overseed with rye, generate some revenue, and rebuild properly when adequate funds are available? Overseeding should be viewed as a temporary measure — not an annual routine."

BREAKDOWN: NO - 6; YES - 7 (3 of the yes answers were directly related to developer sales competition for "greener greens"); Depends on geographical location - 2

WHY DON'T NORTHERN GOLF COURSES PLANT PALM TREES?

"Next to the lottery, the biggest gamble in Florida is bentgrass," according to Reed LeFebvre, past president of The Florida Golf Course Superintendent's Association. Bentgrass has been used by a few courses in Florida for at least 10 years and from that experience Reed says, "the turf did not live up to expectations on a year-to-year basis. Courses that play only 25-50 rounds of golf per day can hardly prove that bentgrass is a viable alternative for Florida greens."

After attending the seminar on the use of bentgrass greens in Florida, reading up on the subject, writing this article based on first hand information from 15 of our fine Florida Golf Course Superintendents and having had some 24 years of "information by osmosis," as the wife of a superintendent, I have formed my own thoughts on this issue. Based in part on the following:

Would sitting in a chicken house all day make you a chicken? How about transporting a beautiful northern greener than green, bentgrass green from the cool, crisp region in which it was grown and placing it in our warm, heavy air? Would that give you a beautiful greener than green, bentgrass green in Florida?

Why don't northern courses plant palm trees? And why can't we have "Christmas trees" on our courses down here? When our northern visitors arrive, comments are always made which extol the beauty of our swaying palms and our symmetrical, state tree, the Sabal Palm (my favorite). And I always comment about the classical northern pine trees when we visit the north. The point I am getting at is: let us all enjoy, work with and be grateful for what Mother Nature, in Her wisdom of the ages, has given to us. And then let us all marvel at and enjoy what She has given others up in their special corner of the earth.

I vote for building snowmen up north where they can thrive; while we concentrate on building sandcastles in Florida that can match their beauty. ■