

# ABOUT FACE!

## 'General' Changes His Mind on Bentgrass

by Larry Kieffer

A leading general in the Florida bentgrass war has switched sides.

Arnold Palmer, long seen as a proponent of growing bentgrass on Sunbelt greens year around, has decided to give up the practice at one of his most visible projects, Isleworth CC, an exclusive community just north of Orlando in central Florida.

"There are several reasons for the decision," said Ed Bignon, director of operations for Arnold Palmer Golf Management Company, which manages Isleworth for Palmer, who owns it.

"Basically, it was a business decision."

"Arnold is very sensitive to the needs of the superintendents and, after four years, he decided bentgrass greens at Isleworth in the summertime are not worth the strain it puts on the superintendent and his staff."

Bentgrass, the superfine-bladed turf used on greens in northern climes, is generally regarded by top players to provide a putting surface superior to bermudagrass, the turf commonly used in tropical climates.

Bermudagrass lies with a "grain," which affects speed and accuracy of the roll, and it goes dormant — turns brown — in winter, a condition most golfers find esthetically unacceptable even if the actual effect of dormancy on roll is minimal.

To combat the problem of dormancy, bermudagrass

greens usually are overseeded in autumn with cool-season grasses such as bentgrass or rye. Those grasses take over as the bermudagrass goes dormant, and then die in spring — sometimes with the help of the superintendent — when the bermudagrass resumes growing.

But golf course owners have been tempted to try to grow bentgrass year around for more than 40 years, according to several experts who spoke at a "Bentgrass in Florida" seminar at JDM Country Club in Palm Beach Gardens last month. Year-around bentgrass would eliminate the effort and problems associated with overseeding while gaining what is perceived to be a superior putting surface in summer.

Unfortunately, bentgrass is not biologically suited to a hot, humid climate. In order to keep it alive in summer, it must be hand-watered several times daily. The excessive watering leaves the plant susceptible to fungus infections which, in turn, require the use of fungicides at higher levels than many agronomists and environmentalists consider desirable.

"Arnold just decided it wasn't worth it," Bignon said. "After four years, it has become obvious that it is not a good idea to try to grow bentgrass at this course in the summertime."

Maintaining bentgrass through the summer is a very expensive proposition, calling for a total annual maintenance budget of \$700,000 or more, Bignon said.

"But money was not the issue," he added quickly. "Arnold is too sensitive to his people to put them through it for another summer. It has been weighing very heavily



Bentgrass will not be growing on the 18th green, above, at Arnold Palmer's Isleworth CC near Orlando next summer.



ARNOLD PALMER

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**ED BIGNON, Director of Operations  
Arnold Palmer Golf Management Co.**

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The greens at Isleworth will be replanted with bermuda this spring and overseeded next autumn, "probably with bent," Bignon said.

"We really began looking seriously at using Tifdwarf (a strain of bermudagrass) early this summer," Bignon said. "We have Tifdwarf at one of our other properties in central Florida — MetroWest (also near Orlando) — and, believe, me, the ball will flat roll. It's not nearly as grainy (as other strains of bermuda) and we are very impressed. We know the membership will be, too."

Two other factors weighed in the decision — traffic at Isleworth and Palmer's unique position in the golf world.

Traffic is one of the critical factors in the viability of bentgrass during the long, hot, humid Florida summer. Walking on the grass is very stressful to the plant, particularly when it is growing out of its natural environment. Even the strongest advocates of year-round bentgrass have conceded that it can be done only on courses that don't get a lot of play in summer.

"The demographics at Isleworth didn't turn out to be what we thought they would be," Bignon said. "Four years ago, in the planning stages, we felt that 20-30 players would be a busy day in summer.

"We are not anywhere near buildout and we already have

a lot of days when we get 40-50, even 60 players a day in summer. Most of our members are turning out to be year-around residents."

With traffic at Isleworth already higher than expected and everything indicating it will steadily increase, the club no longer fits the profile of a good candidate for experimenting with bentgrass.

"You understand, if we had been right, we would have been hailed as pioneers," Bignon said with a chuckle.

Weighing even more heavily was Palmer's awareness of his position as one of the two most influential men in golf (the other being Jack Nicklaus, who also is growing bentgrass at some of his courses in South Florida).

"Right from the very beginning, Arnold was a little concerned that other people would try to copy him," Bignon said. "But he never dreamed so many people would see what he was doing and then go back to their own clubs and say, 'If Arnold Palmer can do it so can we.'

"He didn't want that to happen, but unfortunately, it did. And Arnold Palmer is actually aware of the problems this (pressure to grow bentgrass in summer) has caused superintendents all over the state.

Coming at the heels of his alliance with the Florida Turfgrass Foundation's effort to raise a \$5 million endowment for turf research, Palmer's decision on Isleworth is likely to enhance his leadership position in the golf course construction and maintenance industry.

Furthermore, his tacit admission that it is not yet possible to grow what is perceived to be the "ideal" putting surface in Florida's summer climate can only emphasize to golfers, most of whom understand little about agronomy, the need for more turf research.

Bignon said he and Palmer both think, "from what we have seen," that the answer to the current drawbacks of bermudagrass lies in developing a cool-tolerant strain of that plant as opposed to finding a heat-and-humidity-tolerant strain of bentgrass.

He also said the Isleworth decision did not necessarily apply to other Florida courses in the Palmer stable.

"Each situation must be handled individually," he said. "We can only tell an owner what we recommend. If he said, 'I absolutely insist on bentgrass,' then we have to give him what he wants.

"If his pockets are deep enough and he is ready for the headaches associated with bentgrass, then we have to give it to him.

"But the bottom line is to create the best possible putting surface for the members and I don't think today's bentgrass is the answer." ■

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