

# Becker devises poa annua solution

BY BOB SPIWAK

Ask any golf course superintendent what he fears most about his greens and the answer will likely be poa annua taking up residence. Poa, or annual bluegrass, is as invasive as crabgrass, and while puttable, it weakens and disfigures bentgrass greens. It is prolific, goes to seed even when cut at putting heights, and delights in traveling to a locations on the soles of golf shoes and on mowers.

Superintendent Chris Becker runs the greens show at Fairways Golf Course in Cheney, Wash. His job began three years ago

when the course was built. His mission: the finest putting surface around. This meant keeping the Pennncross bentgrass greens completely free of poa annua.

The weed thrives in this geographical area. Springs are wet, autumns a little less so. Summer days rarely go above 90 degrees and winters offer a warming blanket of snow that protects the shallow-rooted grass.

Becker's formula for poa-free greens is based on a decade of experience as a superintendent. In this time he has continually tested products, talked informally with other super-

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## ON THE GREEN

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intendents and kept up on the latest research in the field.

He double-verticuts every three weeks, then applies about one-eighth a yard of sand per thousand feet of green. The sand is the same as what was used to build the green.

He cuts at 5/32 inch, using Toro groomers. To feed the healthy turf, 1/10th pound per 1,000 feet of nitrogen and potassium is applied weekly, and trace minerals are added as determined by continual soil testing.

Greens are aerated twice a year. In September a hollow-tined aerator is used, and the cores are then worked back into the turf. In the spring, when play is heavier, the grounds crew punches the putting surface with quarter-inch solid tines. Maximum irrigation is one inch per week on the sand-based greens.

Becker is convinced that "spoon feeding" of nitrogen is a vital combination of controlling bentgrass growth and, with lower nitrogen content, discouraging the growth of poa. Applying potassium in amounts equal to that of nitrogen gives the turf rigidity and improved resistance to disease. This again minimizes the opportunities for invasion of poa.

Becker said, "The person who developed the spoon-feeding concept should get a medal."

Daily, the superintendent checks for scalping of repair or hole-change plugs. If one is scalped, it is replaced with a healthy one. Where undulations have been scalped — a rare occurrence because of the top-dressing program — they are top-dressed and watched carefully.

"Using the groomers allows the greens to be cut at 5/32 instead of one-eighth and we get the same speed — about 8.5 to 9 on the stimpmeter," said Becker. He is happy with this, considering twice-a-year aeration that keeps the greens "pretty soft."

To prevent outer-pass tracking with the riding mowers, which can wear down turf and leave a vulnerable area, the outside cut is moved in six to eight inches twice a week.

Any poa that does appear is immediately removed with cup cutters or a knife, then replaced with Penncross plugs. So far, Becker has not used any chemicals for poa prevention on the greens, although he uses Scott's TGR on the fringes and tee boxes, which are Bristol vieta merit Kentucky bluegrass.

The Victa/fescue fairways are constantly overseeded, but Becker said germination takes such a long time "it's a real hit-and-miss situation."

He is now experimenting with pre-germination of the seed, using germination sacks. "We've been fortunate so far," he said. "The Victa is aggressive and so healthy that poa is less than 5 percent."

Becker's poa program proved itself during the killer February temperatures of 1989. With chill factors to 70 degrees below zero, and snowcover ranging from minimal to none, the cold-vulnerable poa that comprises some or all of many Northwest greens died. Courses opened in the spring with decimated putting surfaces; some were playing temporary greens into July.

But Becker's Fairways course emerged unscathed. Winter damage to the greens was nil, and when it opened in early spring, the regular greens were playable.

Becker gave credit for the success to his crew.

"They take pride in having the finest greens around," he said. "They understand how quickly poa can invade and they take all precautions to prevent it."

Becker's crew plays to handicaps of two, six and 11, and their knowledge of what com-

prises a good putting surface pays off in the care and dedication they give their greens, he said.

Becker said he has seen poa invade courses. Some in the area are now almost totally comprised of this grass in the greens. He has seen pure bentgrass greens go to half poa in less than three years.

Winter damage from desiccation, snow mold, ice and just plain cold temperatures will likely produce some turf thinning or kill, he noted.

"If you don't re-sod or seed with bentgrass, you can be guaranteed that the poa will move right in," he said.

*Bob Spiwak is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Mazama, Wash.*

# FAA rule pushes course away from airport

Developers of an 18-hole golf course at Yakima (Wash.) airport probably won't be able to build on their proposed site, but may be able to do so on a nearby one.

The airport board told Spokane developer Dan Clark, president of Pacific International Corp., in late December that the proposed site south of the main east-west runway was too close to the airport.

The Federal Aviation Administration requires that golf course boundaries at airports be a minimum of 1,000 feet from the center of runways. That stipulation left just 30 acres available for development. Though

an exception is possible, developers were told it is unlikely.

However, the board encouraged Clark to consider a 130-acre site west of the runways that the airport now leases to a rancher.

Yakima currently has just one nine-hole course, although it could support two 18-hole municipal courses, according to National Golf Foundation standards.

Clark hopes to build an 18-hole municipal course with clubhouse and pro shop. The total price tag should be between \$2 million and \$3 million.

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