

Wall-to-wall not a bad idea at all, in world of sod & golf

Reebok's Fireman, Willowbend's Tusts make a costly but worthwhile decision

By HAL PHILLIPS

MASHPEE, Mass. — When athletic footwear magnate Paul Fireman decided three holes at his Willowbend Golf Club didn't measure up to PGA tournament standards, he had them rebuilt. When the redesign took longer than expected — perhaps endangering the annual Reebok Pro-Am in June — Fireman had all three holes sodded: Tees, greens, fairways, rough... everything.

"Mr. Fireman decided he wanted to have it done by the tournament, so we had to sod it," explained head superintendent Chris Tusts. "We had a \$150,000 budget for buying and laying the sod, but money wasn't really the issue."

It rarely is for Fireman, chairman of Reebok and owner of Willowbend. Dr. Michael Hurdzan designed the course and redesigned holes 13, 14 and 15 last year. But the creative process spilled over into the winter months, making a grow-in impractical in light of the tournament date.

The first roll of sod — 60-feet long and four-feet wide — was laid down April 12, by Kingston Turf Farms of West Kingston, R.I. The job was finished April 23, and "they had one and half inches of root growth after 10 days," explained Peter Butson



At their sod farm in West Kingston, R.I., Kingston Turf Farms employees (left) start rolling sod. They don't even have to stop the machine. At right, Dave Wallace of Tee and Green Sod (right) watches as a crew lays four-foot-wide sod on a green at Willowbend Golf Club in Mashpee, Mass.

of Kingston Turf. "They had mowed the greens four or five times in the first 10 days."

According to Butson, Kingston is one of the few companies capable of laying four-foot-wide swaths of turf. "We can lay down 240 square feet of sod with each roll," he explained. "With a seam every four feet, it's not going to move when you top-dress it."

To the superintendent, the width of the sod rolls made all the difference.

"It was phenomenal — seams only every four feet," raved Tusts. "When the first two greens had been in a month, you'd never know they had been sodded. They looked great."

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Sodding fairways is no big deal. In fact, Kingston Turf had sodded fairways at one of Willowbend's neighboring courses — The Country Club at New Seabury — following Hurricane Andrew last year.

But sodding greens is more

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revolutionary, though it's becoming more commonplace. Cordillera, a 3,100-acre private resort and residential community in Vail Valley, Colo., will spend \$560,000 this summer sodding fairway and greens. There's no particular rush. The Hale Irwin course isn't scheduled to open until the spring of 1994.

Further west in Palm Desert, Calif., West Coast Turf is sodding all 36 greens at Indian Ridge Country Club's two Arnold Palmer designs. According to Jeff Cole of West Coast, the 172,000 square feet of washed Penncross roots quicker and drains better than the unwashed bentgrass sod.

The Pennlinks bentgrass used at Willowbend — provided by



Tee 'n Green of West Kingston — was also washed, which made a big difference, according to all parties involved.

"It all has to do with your existing water table," Tusts explained. "Normally, water stops when it reaches a different soil surface, fills up, then releases into the next soil level. If you lay sod with attached soil, the water holds there and you can't get on it very quickly. Too mushy. You need good drainage and the attached soil holds up the process."

The sandy soil on Cape Cod only reinforced the decision to use the washed sod.

"The more sand content in the soil, the easier it is for us," said Butson, who endorses washed sod from a supplier's

point of view.

"We feel the shelf life is increased and you don't have the humus creating heat. It has the tendency to dry faster and, because you have nothing but root, there's no thatch."

Tusts, for one, doesn't believe the washed sod take any quicker than the soiled alternative. "They claim it roots much better, but I haven't found that."

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Not everyone has \$150,000 of disposable income, but Butson believes sodding is a coming trend. It's expensive, but there are distinct advantages over the grow-in, he said.

For a new course, it's a break-even proposition," said Butson. "Depending on the cost of the sodding, you can't make it back with greens fees the first year, but you've got no erosion problems; you get on the maintenance program right away; and the whole operation is settled in, on-line much faster."

"In the long run, it's worth it."

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New chapter is added to the international world of 'air freight'

MEXICO CITY, Mexico — A strange cargo is being flown in the friendly skies between here and Southern California: sod.

West Coast Turf of Palm Desert, Calif., is air-freighting 130,000 to 140,000 square feet of washed bentgrass sod to replace all 18 greens and a practice putting area at Club Campestre de la Ciudad de Mexico.

When the exclusive country club lost its greens to a turf problem, the club's agronomy consultant, California superintendent Michael Hathaway, suggested sod.

Enter West Coast Turf.

"We air-freight stolons everywhere, but I've never heard of anyone ever air-freighting sod," said Jeff Cole, director of marketing for West Coast Turf. "It's kind of pricey. It adds about 50 percent to the cost [of about \$1 per square foot]. But our alternatives worried me."

The alternative was to drive the sod to Mexico in refrigerated vans — a four-day trip. "Because of the time and

the rough roads, which are nasty in some places, we decided against it," Cole said.

Mexico only allows washed sod over its border. So West Coast Turf was a logical choice.

"We wash ours," Cole said. "You get a clean product and immediate rooting, with no interfacing problems. But in this case it also helped, because washing eliminates weight."

He estimated the average green weighs 15,000 to 20,000 pounds.

By mid-June West Coast Turf had shipped 90,000 square feet of the sod. Cole expects to complete delivery around Aug. 1.

Awaiting each shipment is Texas-educated turfgrass specialist Marcelino Marino, who is overseeing greens construction.

Hathaway, Cole and Marino are banking on bentgrass thriving in this city, which lies more than 7,000 feet above sea level, perhaps an ideal climate for growing the turfgrass.