



By STANLEY J. ZONTEK

The weather was not kind to golf course superintendents in the Eastern third of the Mid-Atlantic region, but the catastrophic loss of turf due to winter kill can ultimately prove to be an opportunity.

The winter of 1993-94 will be remembered as one of the worst in memory. Record snow and ice fell and temperatures were very cold. The problems began in areas where ice accumulated and stayed on the ground for an extended time. This is a rarity in the Transition Zone. Grass was killed. The most affected species were poa annua on greens, and perennial ryegrass and Bermudagrass on fairways and tees.

Even in mid-May, courses were closed. Many were open but playing on temporary greens. Fairways had been entirely or partially reseeded. And winter-damaged Bermudagrass was just being replanted. By almost any measure, this has been a terrible year.

The turf loss on courses cut across most all economic and social lines. Turf was killed on the most modest nine-hole courses to the largest and most prestigious 18-, 36- and 54-hole complexes. What to make of it?

Basically, if weather patterns are extreme enough, and grass species are susceptible, the operating budgets on courses will not prevent or lessen the effects of the weather. Also, susceptible grass species are just that, susceptible to the type of damage experienced.

Will one year of damage be enough to persuade a golf course to change grasses? To change their philosophy of course maintenance? Maybe so, and maybe not.

If your course has greens of predominantly poa annua, the point was proven: This species on greens was the most affected. Bentgrass survived the extremes of the weather just fine. In preparing for the future, the more bentgrass a course has on greens, tees and fairways, the better. Of all the turfgrass species grown, especially on greens, poa annua is the most prone to both winter damage and summer heat-stress problems.

Interestingly, the winter turf loss may ultimately prove to be a blessing in disguise for some courses. Certainly, more creeping bentgrass exists now in most all the damaged greens, both due to the recovery from seed and the natural spread of any bentgrass present in the green initially.

Also, on at least some courses which have had the most severely damaged greens, some are considering fumigating and regrassing to pure bentgrass. The reason is simple: In the Transition Zone, the more bentgrass you have in the greens, the better. Regrettably, as this winter and a hot and humid summer have

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MAINTENANCE

Grabbing opportunity where disaster threatened

shown, the reverse is also true.

Therefore, the catastrophic loss of turf due to winter kill can ultimately prove to be an opportunity not to be missed. Regrassing is a good way to solve a longstanding poa annua problem with the greens, by establishing new bentgrass, be it the older, tried-and-true varieties or some of the newer cultivars which have been released recently (see story, page 1).

Several courses whose golfers desired bentgrass fairways are using the winter kill as an

opportunity to convert from perennial ryegrass. However, a vast majority of courses with perennial ryegrass fairways and tees are replanting to rye. The golfers like its appearance and playability, and the reasoning goes that it makes little sense to overreact to just one year of winter kill and replant to a different grass species.

If the winter problems continue, individual courses can always rethink this decision. For now, most of the damaged courses are replanting to perennial ryegrass, thinking

that the possibility of winter problems recurring are slim.

On winter-damaged Bermudagrass, most turf managers are replanting to Bermudagrass. If a course has been growing one of the Bermudagrasses least tolerant to winter kill, changing to a more winter-hardy species may be prudent. After all, in the Southern half of this region, where bentgrass tees and fairways exist, there are fewer grass options for fairways. Winter damage to Bermudagrass is much more common. When it

occurs, you replant.

In the final analysis, following the hard winter of 1993-94, all a turf manager can do is:

- plant/replant the best grass possible;
- maintain the turf as best the budget allows;
- use proven agronomic practices to prepare any and all grasses for the winter (or summer); and
- realize that as good as most of today's supers are, as good as our new grasses are, as thorough as our understanding of course management may be, maintaining turfgrass is still an inherently insecure job — "weather" we like it or not.

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