

Wetting agents can help re-establish putting greens

By DAVE COUSART

ATHENS, Ga. — In September 1986, I had the opportunity to return to Athens to assume the duties of golf course superintendent and golf professional at the University of Georgia Golf Course. It was a move from Bermudagrass greens back to bentgrass. This opportunity has been quite a challenge.

Built in 1968, the UGA Golf Course is a Robert Trent Jones design offering a great challenge to any level of player. The greens were rebuilt between 1989 and 1990. We rebuilt nine greens at a time to U.S. Golf Association specifications. One of the main reasons was to increase the percolation (perc) rates to levels necessary for producing quality bentgrass putting surfaces. On a public course averaging 50,000 rounds a year, this was an absolute necessity. However, my perc rates are still sub-par four years after rebuilding.

Working with Tifton Physical Soil Testing Laboratory, samples show a perc range of 4 to 6 inches per hour. My observations have been that, despite a low percolation, we still have isolated hot spots on all humps, crowns, and tiers throughout the course.

In spring 1990, I knew I was going to have problems with the new greens. The use of a wetting agent was suggested. My experience with these products had not been good. I've had problems with turf burn associated with wetting agent applications. Naturally, I was skeptical. I decided to experiment with Montco Product's Surfside 37 wetting agent.

I set up small plots on my bentgrass nursery in June 1990. The wetting agent was applied on a clear afternoon when temperatures exceeded 85 degrees. Treatments consisted of 8, 16, 32 and 128 ounces per 1,000 square feet, and were not watered in after application. In fact, all irrigation was withheld until the next afternoon. This was not the recommended procedure for use, but I wanted to put the product through the wringer on the nursery before taking it to the greens.

The next afternoon I saw no phytotoxicity. The 128-ounce rate had no burn despite not watering in. Still full of reservations, I was convinced enough to treat my high spots and crowns with a backpack sprayer at 16 ounces per 1,000

square feet. We applied the wetting agent and hand watered these areas immediately after application as recommended on the label. I saw improvement overnight.

After this success with the isolated dry spots, I decided to treat entire green complexes. I assumed if a wetting agent could safely improve the water content on elevated areas, it might help reduce the need to syringe daily or nightly irrigation.

All assumptions have proved correct. Though I have not replicated with different plots, the results are consistent across the 18 greens and practice areas.

My program begins in mid-March with an application of 16 ounces per 1,000 square feet on all green complexes and 32 ounces per 1,000 square feet on all humps and high spots. This initial application is done immediately after spring aerification. Next, an applica-

tion of 8 ounces per 1,000 square feet is made every three to four weeks from April through mid-September. The final September application is made when core aerification is completed. During the year, when fungicides or fertilizers are applied, a 1-ounce-per-1,000-square-foot rate is applied.

I saved more than 90 percent of my syringe labor budget as a result of these methods. The need for afternoon watering



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was basically eliminated. During summer 1993 we had to syringe less than 10 times in the afternoon. During summer 1994 we only had to syringe two afternoons.

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The following article by Dave Cousart, superintendent at the University of Georgia Golf Course, was reprinted with the permission of Through the Green.

Experiment over: Loxahatchee switches to Bermuda

By PETER BLAIS

JUPITER, Fla. — After 11 years of pushing the bentgrass envelope in South Florida, The Loxahatchee Club began converting from bentgrass to Bermudagrass greens in mid-May.

"It's been an issue for at least the six years I've been here. It's just escalated recently," said Phil Shoemaker, head superintendent at what is believed to be the southernmost course with bentgrass greens in the Sun-

shine State.

Putting surfaces at the exclusive, Jack Nicklaus-designed layout were seeded with Penncross bentgrass prior to opening in 1984.

Hot, humid summer conditions caused the greens to thin to the point that they were not very playable, Shoemaker said. Even though the greens bulked back up by winter, when most of the layout's 17,000 annual rounds are played, enough members complained that the decision was fi-

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nally made to switch to Bermuda.

"With the new mowers and cultural practices, you can get Bermudagrass greens rolling real close to bent, although not quite," Shoemaker said.

The switch was a contentious matter among members, some of whom had bought property around the course because of the bentgrass greens, the superin-

tendent said. Shoemaker believes the switch to Tifdwarf greens is for the better, although it won't eliminate every turf problem at Loxahatchee.

"Now you have to worry about overseeding with ryegrass, the transition period from Bermuda to rye and the effects of a cold winter," Shoemaker said. "But Tifdwarf is the standard here and for now, it's for the best."

In addition to returning the greens, Shoemaker plans on replacing the Tifway II fairways

and tees with a hardier Tifway 419. Quality Grassing and Services Inc. of Lithia will do the grassing work. Nicklaus will oversee the project while redesigning the 8th and 18th holes for safety and real-estate reasons.

Plans were to fumigate greens, tees and three problem fairways in mid-to-late May, Shoemaker said. The entire course will receive two treatments of Roundup. Grassing will start by mid-June and should be completed by mid-July. That will give the course four months to grow in before its scheduled Nov. 15 reopening.

"It's kind of a tight schedule, but we can meet it if we're aggressive," the superintendent said. "Our biggest concern is getting a big storm or a hurricane. Otherwise we're very comfortable with that schedule."

Admiral's Cove Golf Course in Jupiter and The Reserve Golf & Tennis Club in Port St. Lucie converted from bentgrass to Bermudagrass greens in recent years, Shoemaker said. Loxahatchee was believed to be the southernmost club in Florida with bentgrass greens. That honor now passes to The Plantation at Ponte Vedra.

"It thins out a little in the summertime," said Jeremy MacDonald, an assistant pro at The Plantation. "But we're quite a bit farther north and we have an ocean breeze here that helps cool things off. We use fans, too, to help get us through the summer."

Asked if he thought Loxahatchee's bentgrass experience was a failure, Shoemaker responded: "Not at all. The greens lasted 10 years, which isn't bad. Those who favor bentgrass probably still do and those who like Bermudagrass probably feel the same. If a good strain of bentgrass comes along that can tolerate the conditions, it would probably be worth looking at. We have some turf plots going here with Penn State and Texas A&M universities that are showing some interesting things."

Wetting agents

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The use of a wetting agent has helped eliminate hard-to-wet areas. By treating the entire greens complex, it seems water movement through the soil has improved. This has decreased the need for daily irrigation and nearly eliminates the need to syringe during the day. We have saved our operation more than \$7,000 per year in labor costs during the summers of 1993 and 1994.

The bottom line in any golf operation is to provide the best facility for the least amount of money. And, in most cases, the operation must show a profit. The wetting agent we used has definitely contributed to the vast improvement of the University of Georgia Golf Course the last few years. Just ask the golfers.



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