

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-

See related stories, pages 20-21

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

Continued from previous page

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