

Frank's Bermudagrasses beat the odds — heat, drought, intrusion...

By GORDON WITTEVEEN

NAPLES, Fla. — It quickly becomes obvious that Paul Frank is a man of the earth. His weathered tan indicates a long-time association with the land, the plants and the wildlife. It all started when, as a youngster, he helped his father with the farm chores and, in the process, developed a love for nature. The Franks raised cattle on their Florida homestead and, through hard work, prospered.

In the early 1970s, father and son decided to turn the farm into a golf course. With the help of architect Arthur Hills, they created Wilderness Golf Club and Paul Frank became the first and only superintendent. A quarter century later, it is hard to imagine that this golf course was once a farm. The holes seem to have been carved from a tropical forest, and the ponds appear to be natural extensions of the nearby Everglades. God made it so, but with a lot of help from Frank.

A tour with Frank of his golf course proves he is no ordinary superintendent. We stop frequently and get down on our hands and knees to inspect the grass. On a particular green, Frank gets out his long, pointed jack knife and pries into the soil, carefully lifting a



An advantage of Paul Frank's PF-11 is that it does not allow 419 to intrude into a green, even after 12 years.

stolon of Bermudagrass turf.

"See," he said, "look how vigorous it is," pointing at the sprouting grass plant and the tiny leaf blades growing at every node.

Twelve years ago, during a particularly bad time for any kind of grass to survive, Frank noted a patch of green grass on his 11th green. It stood out

because the rest of the green was in poor condition. He took a few sprigs from this patch and planted them in a flower pot in his office. Within eight weeks, the new grass had overgrown the flower pot.

Realizing he had found something new and unusual, Frank transplanted the contents of the pot to a 2-foot-

square tray. The new grass quickly filled in the tray, and from there it was only a small step to a plot in the nursery.

Eventually, the 11th green was entirely converted to the new grass. And, since that time, five additional greens have been resprigged as well.

Frank baptized the new hybrid Bermuda, "PF-11" — the initials of its discoverer and the place of its birth, the 11th at Wilderness.

Several of the greens at Wilderness have become shaded by the growing trees that surround them. The PF-11 appears to stand up well to these conditions and its vigor is undeniable. It is such a strong grass that there is not 419 Bermudagrass intrusion into the PF-11 green that has been in place for more than 12 years. A golf ball rolls smoothly on the PF-11 greens, but then the other greens putt just as well.

We stop at yet another green and again inspect the grass. "Close your eyes," he said. "Now feel the grass, touch it, gently slide your fingers back and forth. Now, does that not feel like bentgrass?"

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Paul Frank

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By now I have become completely hypnotized by his voice and his overpowering personality. Quack grass would have felt like bent, so I readily agree with him. But when I get out of my trance, I can see for myself the fine-leaved Bermuda does indeed look like a light-colored bentgrass. Certain that he has discovered yet another turf variety, the new grass has been baptized PF-BB (Paul Frank-Bent Bermuda).

It would be easy to dismiss Frank's experiments and observation with grass as the machinations of an overzealous superintendent. But he is no ordinary superintendent. Frank lives in a bungalow on the property, along with 300 members in condominiums scattered throughout. He has a small plane at a nearby airport so he can inspect his ranch near Corkscrew Sanctuary.

He practically owns the course. The property is on a 99-year lease to the members, which is better than ownership, according to Frank. Whereas all 300 members at Wilderness live in condominium flats scattered throughout the property, Frank and his wife live in a bungalow with a Mercedes in the driveway.

Twice a month Frank attends directors' meetings at Barnett Bank. The question goes begging, why would a man so well blessed with the fruits of his labor be interested in sprigs of Bermuda turf? To say he loves grass does not seem adequate, but there is no other explanation.

Frank also loves the natural environment at Wilderness. Like many Florida superintendents, he is very knowledgeable about plant and animal life. He knows all the common names of most species, and, in many cases, the Latin names as well. Long before it became popular for golf courses to become associated with Audubon International, Frank practiced conservation. A dead tree in the middle of the 16th fairway has been a home to woodpeckers and a place for bald eagles to perch for more than 16 years.

Frank enjoys a close relationship with Jay Staton, the golf professional at Wilderness. Staton never goes golfing without his Pentax camera, which is equipped with a 400 mm telescopic lens. The walls in the clubhouse are decorated with his photographs of the wildlife that inhabits the Wilderness preserve. There are pictures of bald eagles, limpkins, ospreys and even bobcats.

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Like all south Florida superintendents, Frank yearly faces the question of whether to overseed Bermuda turf with cool-season

grasses, or to simply leave it alone and let the Northern golfers play on native turf. The problem is, when cool nights occur, the Bermuda turns off-color and golfers conclude there must be something wrong with the greens. The golfers at Wilderness respect their superintendent's knowledge and accept his decision not to overseed the greens nor the fairways. On the tees, Frank compromises and overseeds with poa trivialis.

At nearby Royal Poinciana, Gary Grigg follows the same regimen. The greens have all been resprigged with a new hybrid variety called Quality. The Bermuda greens provide a slick putting surface and tight lies on fairways.

Steve Durand, superintendent at Quail Creek, has overseeded greens, tees and fairways in accordance with his members' wishes. Quail Creek is a sea of green. It looks magnificent, but the overseeded greens tend to

be a little slower than their Bermuda cousins, and the raised lies on the beautifully groomed fairways make it possible for the older golfers to "get at the ball."

Tim Hiers, at Colliers Reserve in Naples, would like for his golfers to putt on Bermuda greens, but he is not satisfied with the quality of the present turf. Therefore, he is experimenting with Quality, and it looks promising on his practice green.

All supers agree that Northern grasses have a place on their tees, but most would prefer to play hybrid Bermuda fairways and greens if only their Northern golfers would let them.

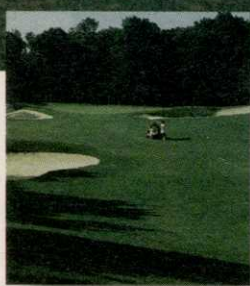
And then there is Paul Frank at Wilderness. The man who discovered his very own grass and does not have enough of it to accommodate all 18 greens. His golfers are patient and willing to wait. The remaining seven greens will be sprigged with PF-11 in the summer of 1997.

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