

less is more

A links-like course in Colorado
embodies a minimalistic idea



The Only Mowers That Adapt to Your Terrain



By John Walsh

One expects to see trees, cart paths, tee markers, ball washers and carts on a golf course – amenities to enhance golfers' experiences and increase revenue – but not at Ballyneal Golf Club in Holyoke, Colo. The private club, which is trying to take golf back to its original roots, is different.

Rupert O'Neal's family has farmed in Holyoke for generations. O'Neal, principal of Ballyneal, left the area years ago but came back recently to operate the family farm, part of which are sand hills.

"About 10 years ago, I started a private hunt club, and it became lucrative," O'Neal says. "I thought I could add a nine-hole golf course as another amenity. Because my brother Jim is a golf pro, I called him to look at the site, and he said designer Tom Doak (of Renaissance Golf Design) was the guy for such a project because he's a minimalist."

Doak was working on projects in New Zealand and Australia when his office was first contacted about Ballyneal. Jim O'Neal, golf pro and principal of Ballyneal, met with Doak at the PGA Show and showed him pictures of the property. Soon after, Doak's Denver-based associate, Jim Urbina, looked at the site.

"Jim said the dunes were rugged but there was enough land to work around that and it could be a spectacular golf course," Doak says.

Doak visited the site three or four months after meeting Jim O'Neal and expressed interest. However, Doak admits he didn't want to sign up for an extensive contract.

"I needed time to come up with the right routing plan," he says. "I wouldn't build the golf course until the routing plan was complete and everyone agreed it would be the best. That took 12 to 18 months. I've been around Sand Hills (Golf Club in Mullen, Neb.) since before it was built, and I didn't want to do a project that was too much like it. At Ballyneal, there were dunes and bowls where most of the fairways and greens now are. The trick was to find a route where you would have visibility throughout the course."

Renaissance Golf Design has been fielding a lot more calls about projects compared to five years ago, Doak says. The three factors that determine whether Doak agrees to work on a project are: the character of the site, its location and the client, who he has to have chemistry with and will give him enough room to do what he wants.

Rupert O'Neal admits his brother Jim is more knowledgeable about golf than he is and knew they should build a links-style course with fescue.

Little earth was moved, and none was removed from the site, while building Ballyneal Golf Club. Photo: Dick Durrance

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“With the sand and the way the site drains, links golf was the way to go, and Doak was the guy to give it to us,” Rupert O’Neal says. “We got the right guy at the right time.”

Rupert O’Neal also took a hard look at the turf industry before going ahead with the project.

“I feel sorry for golf course superintendents because they lament about the way members want their course – members are more concerned about aesthetics than playability,” he says. “I saw large line items for fertilizers and irrigation and the large amount of machinery needed to maintain a course. Then I saw the line item for growth retardants, and it didn’t make sense. At Ballyneal, we’re not going to overwater, overmow or overfertilize. Brown is OK.”

SHAPING UP

The new construction project commenced

September 2004.

“We started to push some sand and soil around and left it to see how it moved in the prevailing winds because I didn’t want bunkers in areas where sand would be blowing across greens and fairways,” Rupert O’Neal says. “It’s hard to keep the edges of wild and native bunkers from moving. The biggest migration of bunkers is during the winter when it’s dry and the wind blows all day, every day.”

A 307 excavator plucked yucca out of the ground and filled the remaining holes with dirt. Doak’s team did all the shaping and built on the go. Rupert O’Neal estimates between 30,000 and 50,000 cubic yards of dirt were moved, not removed, to build the course. There were no trucks used on site to haul dirt. The team didn’t use soil amendments but put down four or five inches of natural compost.

“There were no blueprints because Tom built by the seat of his pants,” Rupert O’Neal says. “Tom was here four days at a time every two weeks and spent more time on the dozer than some architects spend on site. It didn’t make sense to hire a big construction company and have change orders for when Tom moved a bunker. The push-up greens were conceptual. Tom told a shaper what he had in mind, and the shaper would do it. When Tom came back a week later, some greens were correct and some needed small changes.”

“We love to shape when we can,” Doak says. “There are seven guys who work for me. We can’t do the shaping when projects are bigger and more complicated, although we like to do the shaping of the greens and bunkers on all of our projects.”

The minimalist style that people associate

Even though not much fescue is grown in Colorado, it was chosen as the playing surface at links-like Ballyneal. Photo: Dick Durrance



with Doak is difficult to define, he says.

"It doesn't necessarily mean we were not moving more earth than necessary, rather it's not moving more earth in more places than we need to. We want the course to look natural. I try to get a golf course laid out so all we have to do is shape the greens and tees."

The team completed nine holes during the winter of 2004 and seeded the last holes in September 2005. The course opened Sept. 7, 2006 even though people started playing golf in August.

FIRST GROW-IN

Dave Hensley, golf course superintendent at Ballyneal, first arrived on the project to help with construction as an assistant for superintendent Judd Fitzgerald, who quit two months into the project. An assistant superintendent at four or five clubs before coming to Ballyneal, Hensley wanted to work with Doak and become a superintendent.

"I like the idea of taking maintenance back to an easier day, working with what Mother Nature gives you," says Hensley, who managed his first grow-in at Ballyneal.

The fact that everything was done in-house attracted Hensley to the project.

"We put together about 60 guys," he says. "One guy installed every irrigation head, one guy did all the wiring, one team did the hydroseeding, and one team plucked out all the yucca. It was a big task to make sure the right crews were ahead of each other."

The maintenance staff consists of 20 people including Hensley, his assistant and the mechanic, during the season.

WORKING WITH FESCUE

Choosing fescue as the main turfgrass for the course was a big deal and an important decision because there's not much fescue grown in Colorado and Hensley had no prior experience working with it. The O'Neals and Hensley leaned on California-based consulting agronomist Dave Wilber, who had consulted on several of Doak's projects and grew up in Colorado.

"He's considered the guru of fescue," Rupert O'Neal says about Wilber.

To learn more about fescue, Hensley talked to superintendents who went through similar experiences as well as superintendents at Bandon Dunes.

AT A GLANCE Ballyneal Golf Club

Location: Holyoke, Colo.

Web site: www.ballyneal.com

Type of project: New construction

Owners: Rupert and Jim O'Neal

Architect: Tom Doak

Golf course superintendent: Dave Hensley

Project start: September 2004

Golf course opening: September 2006

Cost: Between \$2 million and \$2.5 million, including grow-in and some equipment cost, but excluding land and water

Turfgrass: Majority is fescue with some bentgrass and bluegrass

"I did all my learning at big-name private clubs, and I was used to keeping the grass green," he says. "You really don't understand the fescue surface until you touch it, smell it and play on it. The toughest thing for me was to let it go dormant. I didn't try to overmanage the fescue. They say let the fescue do its thing."

Hensley says it was difficult for him in the beginning to believe he could grow a mixture of fine fescues, bluegrass and colonial bentgrass in the wind, heat, dryness and chill of Northeast Colorado.

"The only thing I knew about it was that it made a fantastic golf surface in Europe and Oregon," he says. "It still puckers me up to think about the climate differences of Oregon and Europe versus that of Colorado. I remember a time during construction when it was 110 degrees outside and the surface heat of the sand was 150 plus, and the wind was blowing 20 miles per hour. I thought there was no way a putting green with fine fescues in the mix would survive in Colorado. Much to my disbelief, it's working, and when you see a surface that contains a fescue mix, you'll never forget how cool it is."

When seeded originally, the greens were 30 percent Colonial bentgrass, and the tees and fairways were 30 percent Colonial bentgrass and Kentucky bluegrass.

"We've stopped overseeding with bluegrass and bentgrass," Hensley says. "Right now, we're overseeding with 100 percent fescue."

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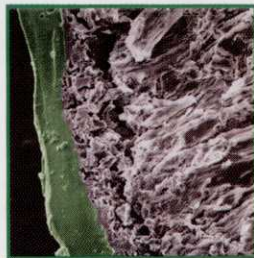
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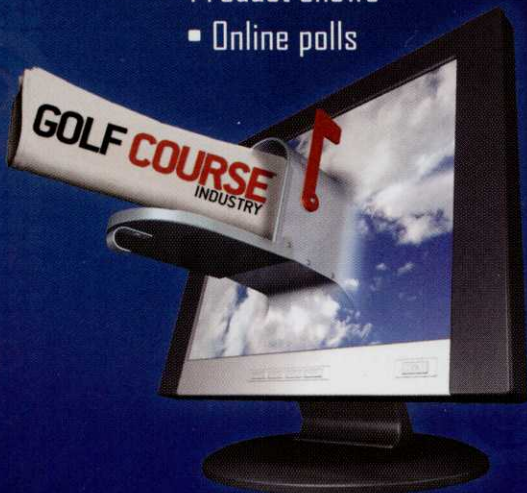
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However, it will take five years from the time of grow-in for the fescue to grow in to where Hensley and the O'Neals want the playing surface to be. Fescue requires less water and fertilizer to establish and maintain than other types of turfgrass, Hensley says.

"We grew in the golf course during one of the hottest summers in Colorado," he says. "The sand sucked everything dry. We didn't have snow that winter, and I kept the irrigation system charged up all winter so I could water a lot. It was a challenge figuring out how the young fescue was going to react to the temperatures and our style of management compared to the bluegrass and bentgrass. It took some experimenting and time to figure out that brown grass was good and brown grass turning to dust was almost good."

In trying to reach his goals, Hensley got ahead of himself in the beginning and started his "links land" watering and fertilizer program a little too early on some of the younger grass.

"I quickly learned it's a very fine line, and in finding that line, we learned that and what not to do," he says. "We found out which species and varieties are most viable in our environmental conditions (we're still finding out what varieties work) and found out what too little and too much fertilizer or water does to each of the species we used in our grassing specs. We can see areas on the course where we abused the fescue in the beginning and areas where we babied it. The areas we abused present the best playing surface. In the areas we gave too much attention to, we're now trying to reduce the percentage of bluegrass and bentgrass in the mix. You can not only see it, but you can feel it underneath your feet. You can feel the difference between a thick stand of fescue/bentgrass/bluegrass mix and stand of primarily bentgrass/bluegrass."

Hensley is still experimenting with different approaches and techniques every day.

"I'm continually told not to overdo things and wait for the fescue to do its thing," he says. "Approaching our third full year, I'm beginning to understand and see what they mean. At the end of the day, I've realized how important Mother Nature's decisions are to the success of our playing surface."

There are always naysayers about fescue,

Doak says.

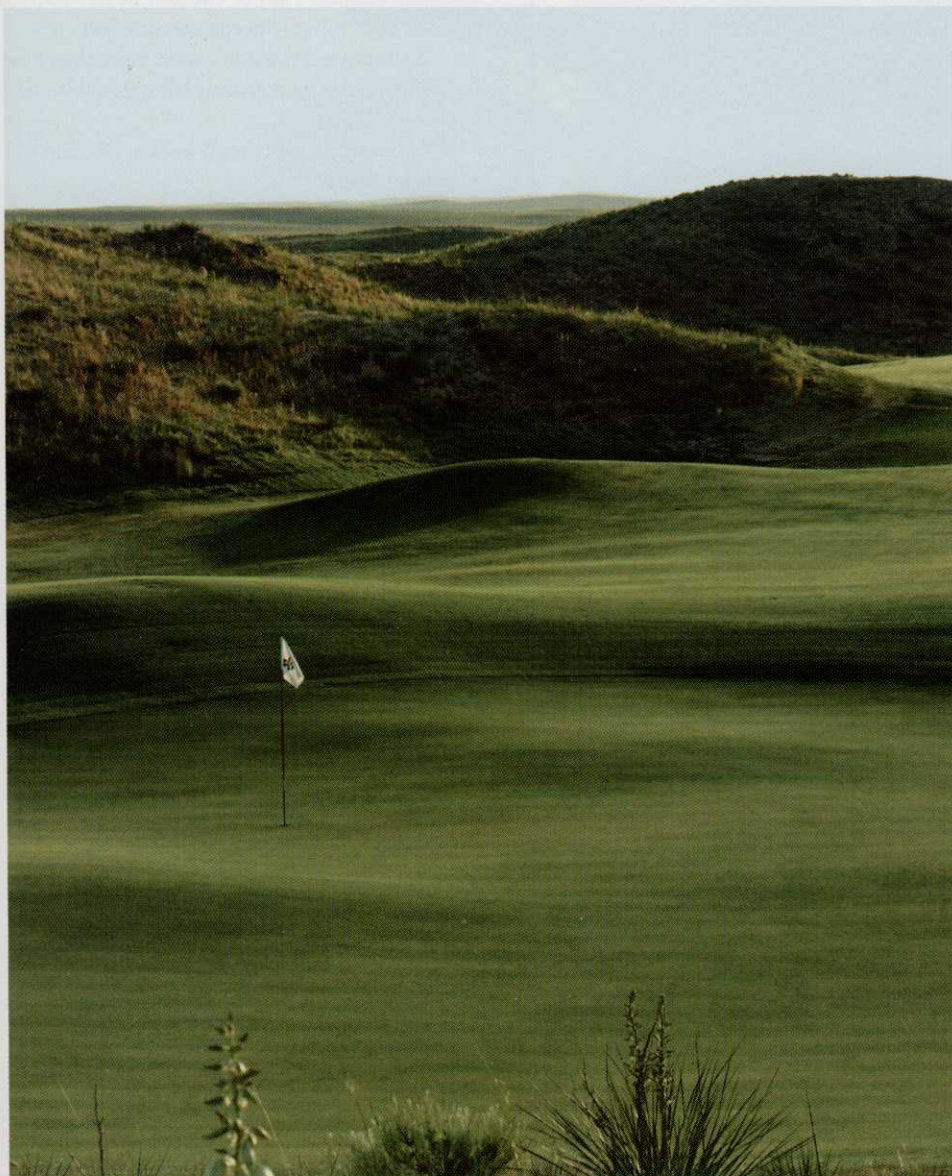
"They say, 'Five years from now, it won't be there,'" he says. "I know just enough about turf to be dangerous, but I know I'm a designer not an agronomist, so Dave Wilber was a big help. The problem with other cool-season grasses is that, in the windy and dry environment, you'd have to water more than fescue and the turf would become too thatchy. You would end up with a spongy surface that wouldn't play fast and firm."

It will take about five years for the fescue to reach the level of conditioning the team at Ballyneal wants. Photo: Dick Durrance

COURSE MAINTENANCE

When it comes to turfgrass management, different environmental climates call for different action. And at Ballyneal, Hensley jumps outside the box before he jumps into the chemical room.

"For the most part, our members and owners could care less about how the course looks, which is different thinking from the average golfer," he says. "Our members just want the



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course to play great. I'm definitely not the most experienced or smartest superintendent, but I feel a lot of guys cause their own problems by trying to overdo things, and it isn't necessarily their fault they're overdoing it. I blame the

mindset of the American golfer that 'green is good.' If golfers would ask, 'How did the course play' rather than 'How did the course look,' our jobs might be a lot easier."

So far, Hensley's pesticide inputs have been

minimal because of the environment and his attitude toward turf management, the cultural practices he implements and the game of golf.

Hensley is big on organic fertilizer. Nitrogen applications are less and less every year. The first year he used 4.5 pounds on the greens, and this year he's down to 2.5 pounds, but that's still higher than he wants, which is less than two pounds a year. Fairways will get two applications a year.

"We need that five-year period to see where we stand," he says.

The greens were mowed at .300 to start, then they went down to .250, and this past year were as low as .220. They're cut four or five times a week, plus rolled. Speeds are nine feet.

"Designwise, you don't want more than nine or 9.5 because it takes away from the contours," Hensley says.

Fairways are cut twice a week at .75, and tees are cut at .625.

The big thing with irrigation is not watering when it's not needed.

"We know with our management approach, it does us no good to sprinkle our grass and that fine fescues don't necessarily like wet feet," Hensley says. "When we water, we let it pour through. We found out that we can't baby this grass or else the playing surface becomes puffy and undesirable grasses thrive.

"We train our hand waterers to carry a small soil probe and water only dry areas, not brown grass," he adds. "My assistants and I constantly monitor and manage for irrigation uniformity. We look at the subsurface before the surface and this helps us make better decisions on when and what not to water."

UNDERSTANDING MEMBERSHIP

Though the course averages 30 to 40 rounds a day, the O'Neals aren't advertising for more members, but they're always looking for people who appreciate links golf. Last year, Ballyneal generated 4,000 rounds. The goal is 10,000 rounds, Hensley says. And the low number of rounds makes the maintenance crew's jobs easier.

"It's less expensive to keep and maintain your course with a true links golf course because you don't have to cover up imperfections," Hensley says. "From a superintendent's standpoint, it's one of the better jobs to have because you have an understanding owner and membership." GCI

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