


Aaron Cape remembers a truck rolling slowly by the golf course as he and his crew sodded some barren patches on Hyland Golf Club's practice green early last summer. Cape didn't recognize the driver, but one of his workers did – a superintendent from a nearby course and the first overt signal that Cape and his new Champion Bermudagrass were “in the fish bowl.”

In the months that followed there was more scrutiny, some of it obvious, most of it discreet. Either way, it seemed everyone was itching to know how an upstart ultra-dwarf would stack up in a region that had been an exclusive bentgrass preserve for decades – and not just any region.

Hyland sits in Moore County, N.C. – the self-proclaimed and officially trademarked Home of American Golf – with more than 40 courses including venerable No.2 at Pinehurst Resort. They've been playing golf there for more than 100 years: U.S. Opens, U.S. Amateurs, Tour championships, you name it. Donald Ross made those sand hills his home. The game's history runs so deep in the area that any break with tradition risks a whiff of sacrilege.

A hand in a white shirt sleeve is shown from the right, holding a golf club head (likely a putter) over a hole on a green. The background is a textured, brownish-green surface.

New superintendent Aaron Cape takes a chance on new seed in old golf country, even if he stands

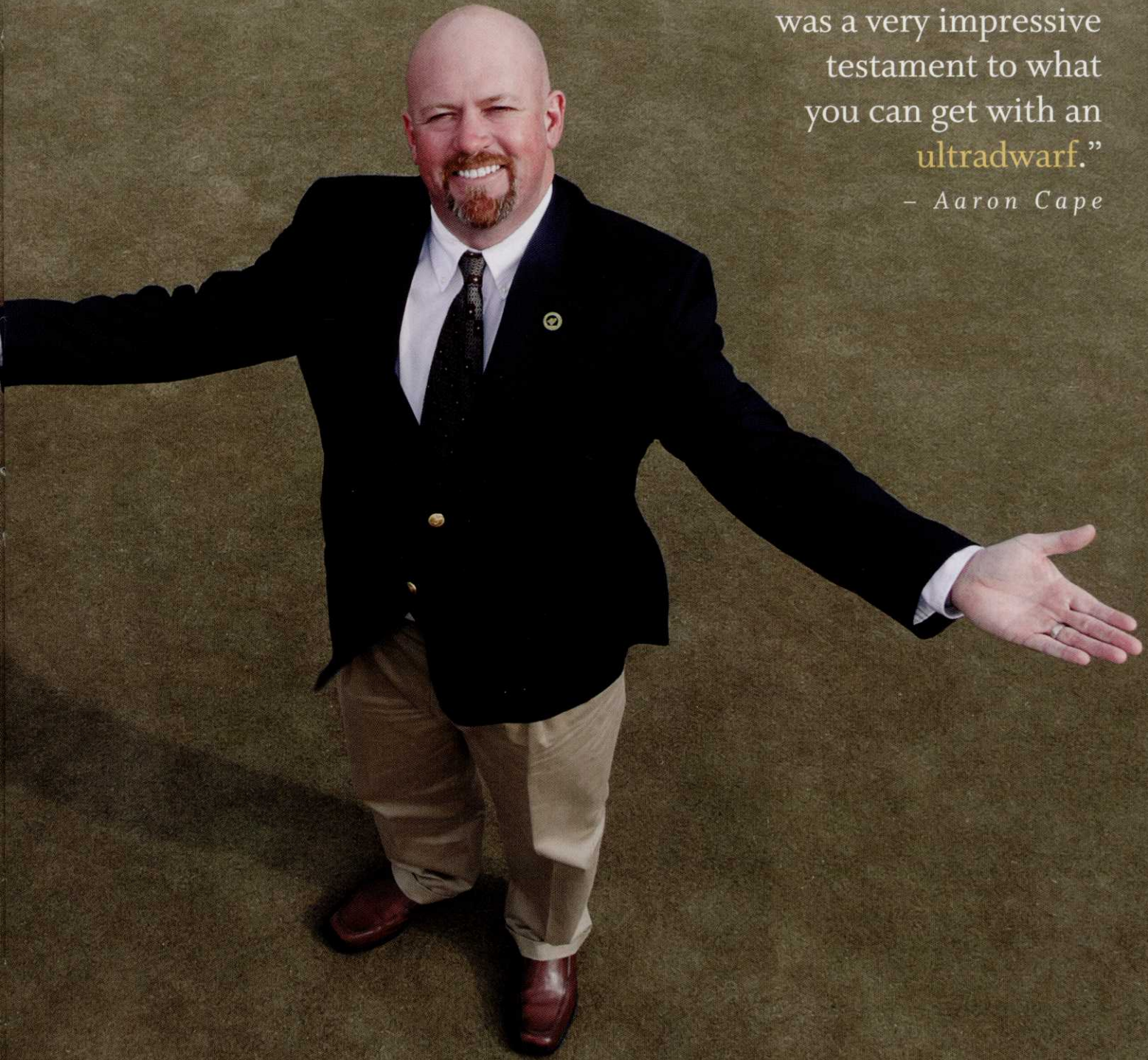
alone.

Ultimately Ultra

By Trent Bouts

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– Aaron Cape



Yet ultradwarfs have spread so widely across the Carolinas and, indeed, across the Southeast that their absence in Moore County was a glaring anomaly. So much so, that it begged the question of whether their exclusion was based on science or stubbornness, maybe even with a dash of snobbery thrown in. After all, Pat O'Brien, the USGA Green Section's Southeast Region director, recalls that when ultradwarfs were first considered at some high-end Southern clubs those members equated giving up their bentgrass to "losing their BMWs."

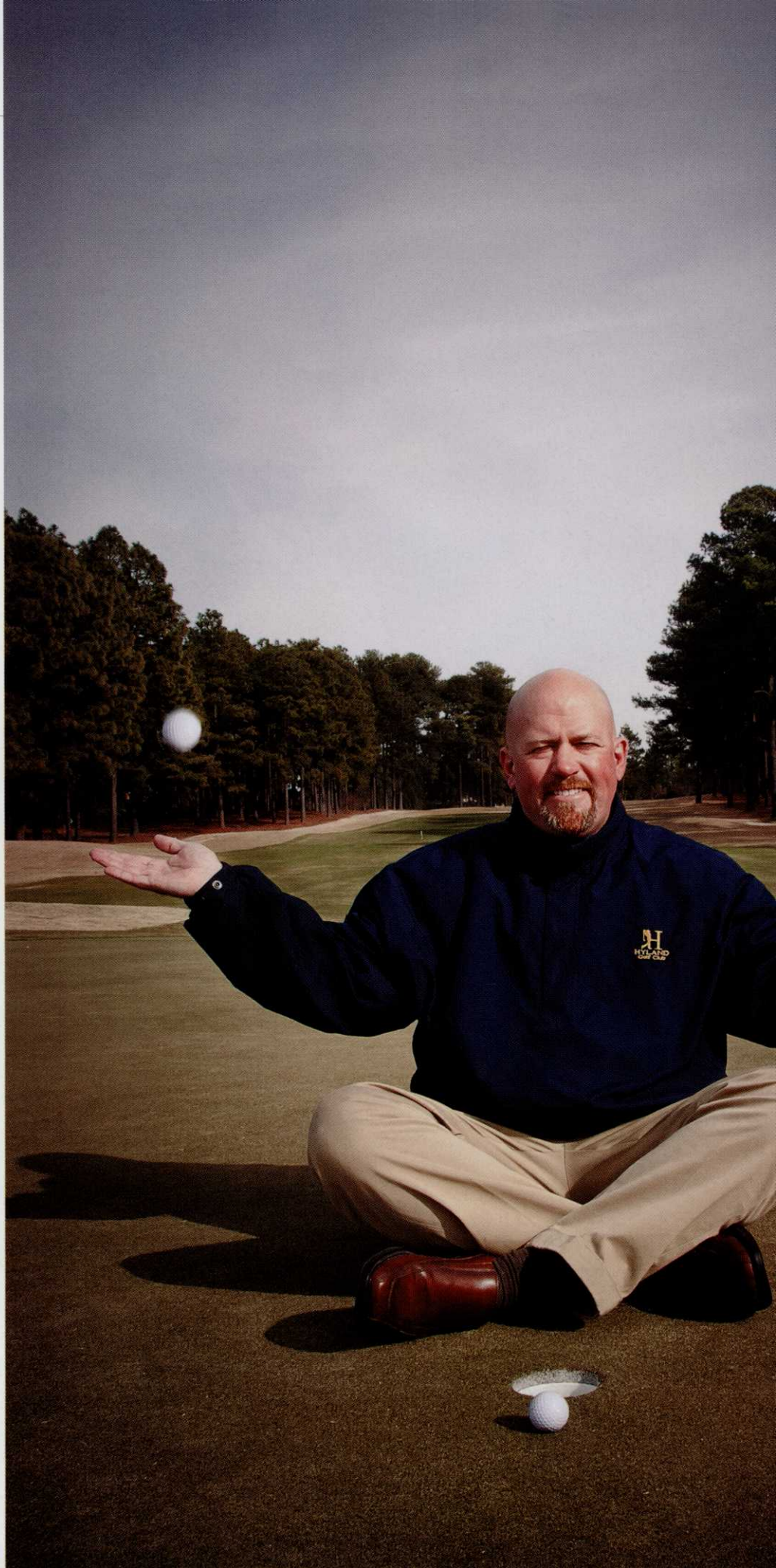
It was against that backdrop that Cape, now 34, stepped into his first head superintendent job at Hyland in August 2009. Under new ownership, the Tom Jackson-designed course formerly known as Hyland Hills, was the first in Moore County to scrap bentgrass and jump on the ultradwarf bandwagon. The new grass was already down by the time Cape arrived, but it was sparse and there was a mountain of cosmetic work to be done before the Sept. 2 opening.

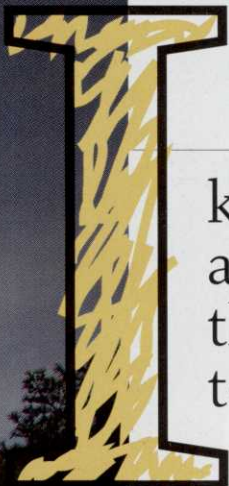
"It was wide open when I got here," he says. "There wasn't enough staff for what we needed to do but at the time, with the recession on, people were coming out of the woodwork looking for work. They'd say, 'When do I start?' And I'd say, 'How about now?' We went from five people to 12 in a couple of days."

Hyland enjoyed an encouraging fall and Cape was happy with the grass coverage he had as the season wound down. But then came one of the toughest winters on record in the Carolinas. Temperatures plummeted and stayed lower longer than they had for years. The threat of winter kill on Bermudagrass hung heavy in the frigid air, particularly over the ultradwarfs that, since emerging in the mid-'90s, had not yet been tested by such sustained cold.

Some of those superintendents who were already wondering how the Champion would do were now quietly expressing worry on his behalf. The grass was a baby and by some measures,

Bucking tradition in the "Home of American Golf," Hyland Golf Club's Aaron Cape scrapped bentgrass and jumped on the ultradwarf bandwagon.





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so was Cape.

He had spent much of the previous decade tending bentgrass on the coast in Myrtle Beach, S.C. His only Bermudagrass greens experience to that point was pre-Myrtle Beach through a part-time gig on a nine-hole course covered in 328, and even then he was “just the weed-eating and groundskeeper guy.”

Still Cape knew enough to pick up the phone. Among those he tapped was George Frye, the former Ryder Cup host superintendent at Kiawah Island Resort, who now handles Champion installations with TransGOLF. He also called former workmate, Adam Charles, at Verdae Greens Golf Club in Greenville, S.C. and Chris Underwood, with Davison Golf Consulting in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

The outcome was a strong focus on controlling moisture near the surface of the new greens. “As cold as it was getting so rapidly I really wanted to keep the soil as loose as I could,” he says. “I wanted to prolong it tightening up.” So he used penetrants to help keep water moving through the soil profile, a profile he top-dressed frequently.

When the weather finally turned and the Champion began growing again, Hyland had survived surprisingly well. There were some trouble spots but shade was the culprit more than the cold. It would have been worse but for a concerted tree trimming and removal campaign Cape carried out early that winter. Overall, he estimates he lost 15 percent of coverage, most of it

on the still heavily-shaded third green. Holes 4, 10, 15 and the practice green were also among those affected, but on review Cape was “very, very pleased.”

Even so, the grapevine carried a different message. “It turned out that the story was going around that we lost our greens, which wasn’t the truth,” Cape says. “Nowhere near the truth. But that’s okay. I knew we were the guinea pigs in the area and that we were, you know, in the fish bowl. Everybody was intrigued to know if we survived.”

A few months later, that fish bowl served as insulation against a brutally hot summer that left those bentgrass superintendents on the other side of the glass gasping for breath. Putting greens up and down the east coast shriveled up and died en masse. The carnage even made headlines in the Wall Street Journal.

All the while, Cape watched his Bermudagrass soak up the sun like a reptile. Early on he had some anxious moments though when his pump station went down in May and for three weeks he had to rely on a single jockey pump. His overseeded ryegrass fairways suffered and the course “looked like Shinnecock at the U.S. Open,” he says. “Although one of my owners, who is a really good golfer, absolutely loved it.”

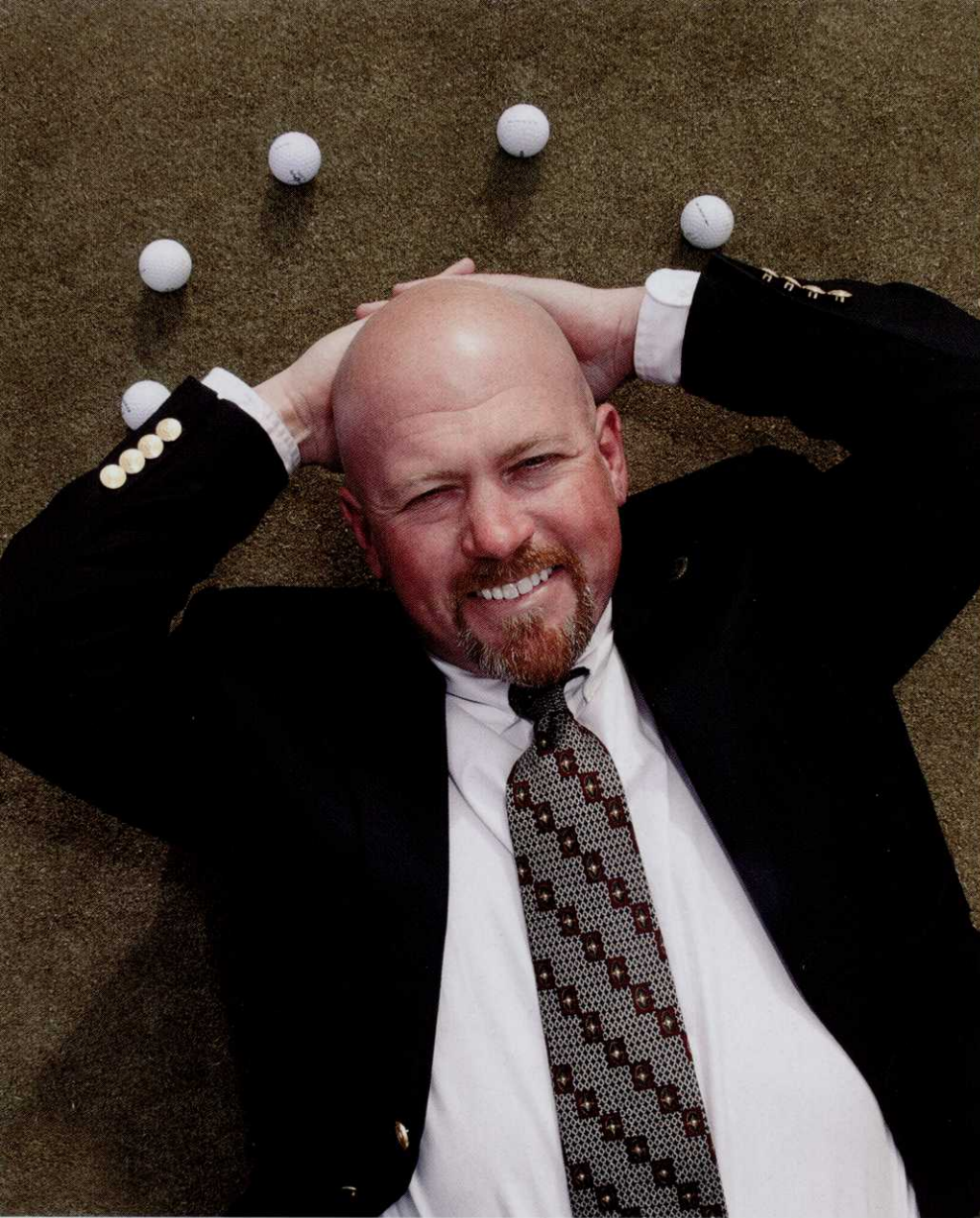
A few months later, thanks to no real rain to that point, Cape again worried about his water supply. The levels in his two

ponds were down to within a couple of feet of the intakes. He was limited to irrigating only greens and even then just sparingly. “If they were getting brown they got a spit,” he says.

Along the way, Cape found himself marveling at the resilience of his greens. “You can pretty much take the grass anywhere you want to,” he says. “It all depends on how much work you want to put into it. To have the putting surfaces we did in the heat of the battle was a very impressive testament to what you can get with an ultradwarf.”

For dyed-in-the-wool ultradwarf proponents like Pat O’Brien, the summer slaughter on bentgrass confirmed what they’d been saying for some time. “For a lot of clubs, particularly those low-to mid-range budget courses, they are finding that the bentgrass model just doesn’t work anymore,” O’Brien says. As he wrote another course further east in North Carolina, recently: “A new world order exists now with the development of the ultradwarfs. Numerous courses in the Carolinas and Georgia have been converting since 1996 and this trend will not go away.”

Others in the Pinehurst area will follow Hyland’s lead, O’Brien says. “Some areas are a little slow to embrace change but I think the folks at Hyland will be seen as geniuses in a few years. Particularly in this economy, it has become more of a business question.” Citing a survey of 36 Southeast courses that have converted from bentgrass, O’Brien adds: “The ultradwarfs can improve the golf



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experience, reduce costs and reduce the risk of devastating turf loss."

To date, Cape is an advocate. "Certainly, I was pretty happy to have Bermudagrass this past summer. My heart went out to the guys with bentgrass, no doubt. If I could have changed the weather for them I would have done it in a heartbeat because I've been there. There's a lot for us still to discover as these greens mature, but I have to say I'm fairly much a believer that the ultradwarfs are the way to go."

To some degree, maintaining an ultradwarf is not that different from care for bentgrass. "My basic philosophy is the same, it's just you're applying that approach to different seasons," he says. "Winter is our wilt season like summer is to bentgrass. If it's cold, really low humidity and windy then we'll take a hose out there and hit some of the mounds and high spots. Similarly, we don't have the disease pressures in summer like bentgrass but we are on guard in spring and fall. That's when we're scouting our greens."

Cape's fundamental goal is to provide a solid nutrition plan. "I want to make sure that what the plant needs is readily available when it wants it," he says. "Whether it's going into dormancy or coming out, I don't want that plant having to look for anything."

Cape went into this winter far better equipped, both mentally and physically. Mentally, he knows he survived the worst winter many veteran superintendents had ever seen in the region. Chances are he might never encounter a tougher one. Physically, his grass is that much more mature, most of the lingering shade issues have been addressed and to literally cap it off, he now has covers to protect those vulnerable areas that remain.

Rather than overseed, he paints his greens, twice that first summer but "hopefully" only once this time around thanks in part to a prolonged fall that kept a green tinge hanging around longer. He looks forward to spring like a kid waiting for Christmas, when he can get to play with his new toy all over again.

Cape's experience, albeit brief, with an ultradwarf leads him to wonder aloud why more courses have not made the switch. "I suspect it's a question of whether those on the other side of the table are interested," he says. "But I think if superintendents can convince their owners and their golfers, they will not be disappointed. You get a more consistent putting surface year round. You're not having to aerify as much in the playing season. It's a win-win in my opinion. I'm sure with a little more time that more courses will jump on the train." **GCI**

Trent Bouts is the president of Tee Media Consulting in Greer, S.C.

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