CAJUN SEASONING

Superintendent Scott Poynot perfects his recipe for a quality playing surface – the right combo of turf and soil that requires the least amount of labor and inputs.

by Dan McDonald

When it comes to turfgrass, the words "good enough" aren't in Scott Poynot's vocabulary. That – and the desire to find a durable, consistent and eco-friendly grass for LeTriomphe Golf and Country Club – has driven Poynot to take some extraordinary steps in the turfgrass management field.

"Conventional wisdom sometimes needs to be challenged," says Poynot, agronomist and long-time superintendent at the south Louisiana club. "Turf grass management standards created by our industry do not come in a one-size-fits-all box." That's why Poynot has what amounts to an experimental turf farm set up maybe 100 yards from LeTriomphe's No. 10 green. At that checker-board location, Poynot and LeTriomphe are studying five different grasses, each planted in neat rows on four different soil conditions.

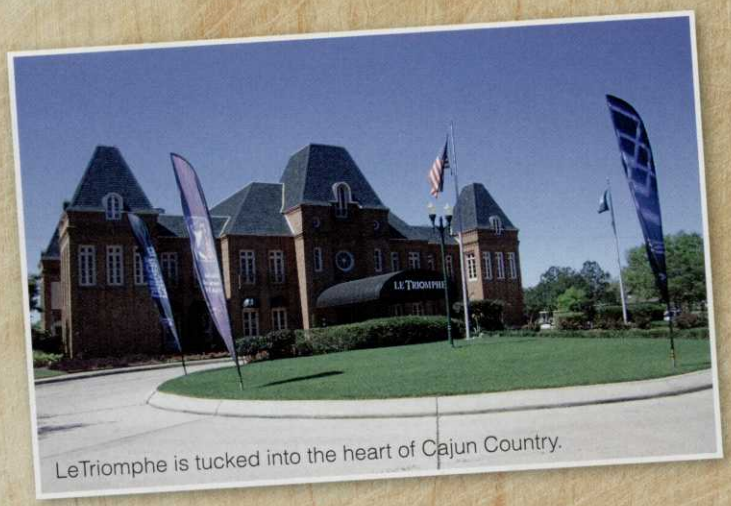
The goal is to learn which grass and soil combinations require the least amount of input and labor while still maintaining the high standards of performance that have become synonymous with the LeTriomphe course. It's the type of research that is normally restricted to commercial turf farms and university agricultural extension programs.

"When most private clubs are looking for ways to cut costs and corners, we're looking for ways to invest wisely and we want to embrace innovation," says LeTriomphe general manager Dawna Waterbury. "I don't know of another club that's trying such a complete and comprehensive approach to its turf management program."

The 20 small plots include plantings of platinum paspalum, sea dwarf paspalum, mini verde Bermuda, tif dwarf Bermuda and tif eagle Bermuda. The four different soil conditions are all USGA sand-in combinations using different amendments.

It's not like LeTriomphe's turf was in peril... far from it, in fact. During the past year, the course's greens drew raves after Poynot be-

Scott Poynot's goal was to find the perfect turf and soil combo while still maintaining the facility's high standards of performance at LeTriomphe Golf and Country Club.



LeTriomphe is tucked into the heart of Cajun Country.

gan a full-foliar fertility approach that has also been used at other high-end courses. Tweaking rates of several different nutritional products, growth regulators and hormones eventually yielded a quality product.

"After trying six different companies' foliar products, we found what I believe are the best foliars available in the industry," he says. "We managed the greens by paying very close attention to clipping yields and color. We also monitored scientific data and warm-season growth potential numbers to determine expected growth and compare that actual daily yield."

The research, time and money was worth it.

"The greens at LeTriomphe are something special," says Ted Scott, a LeTriomphe member and caddie for PGA Tour member and Masters champion Bubba Watson, in September. "I have yet to see Bermuda greens better than what LeTriomphe has right now."

That success came at a price, though, and Poynot sought a solution to the significant dollars and the hours of labor to maintain that high level. He and LeTriomphe both received a plethora of advice from experts based on conventional wisdom, but virtually every new report came with the necessity of additional resources.

"We were spending a significant amount of money and hours and we weren't getting the results that I expected," Poynot says. "That's when I decided to step back and analyze everything that occurred up to this point. I started thinking about all the different variables that make our course conditions unique, and that's where the journey began to go against conventional wisdom."

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"During our annual member-guest tournament this year, our greens' speed was equal to that of the U.S. Open," says LeTriomphe head professional Jeff Anderson. "For the club championship, it was a foot faster than the Open (the staff measured them at 14.5 on the stimpmeter)."

LeTriomphe, a Robert Trent Jones, Jr., course tucked into the heart of Cajun Country, has been open for 26 years. For the past 21 years, it has served as host for the Web.com Tour's Chitimacha Louisiana Open and is one of the five oldest stops on that Tour. But a dozen years ago, the course was struggling to meet PGA Tour standards with regards to greens condition.

"The property was facing challenges when I was asked to come to LeTriomphe," says Poynot, who directed golf maintenance at the property for 12 years.

The course was closed for much of 2003 when the greens were reconstructed, and during that time Poynot sought a superior turf product.

"Our thought process was to avoid the ultradwarf Bermuda grasses," Poynot says. "We didn't want a turf that would require the intense and disruptive processes of frequent vertical moving and topdressing. What we really wanted was a tifdwarf from a farm that had no history of mutating."

After consultations that included PGA Tour involvement, the club went with a middwarf or tweener, one that was receiving a lot of attention for its quality, consistency and texture along with a lack of mutation history.

However, the rhizome and root development with that strain of turf proved to be limited, and after three seasons of extra aerifications and fertility and cultural practices recommended by the USGA, there was still no in-ground improvement in the roots and rhizome structure.

Although LeTriomphe maintained good surfaces and the greens were exceptional for major events such as the Web.com Tour stop, it was getting more and more difficult to produce a consistently high-performing surface.

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Since the roots weren't doing their job, Poynot implemented the full-foliar fertility approach. Even though the greens would not dry down like the Open or Players' Championship surfaces due to the lack of root and rhizome development, the surface quality remained at a high level with Poynot foliarly applying everything the plant needed to be healthy.

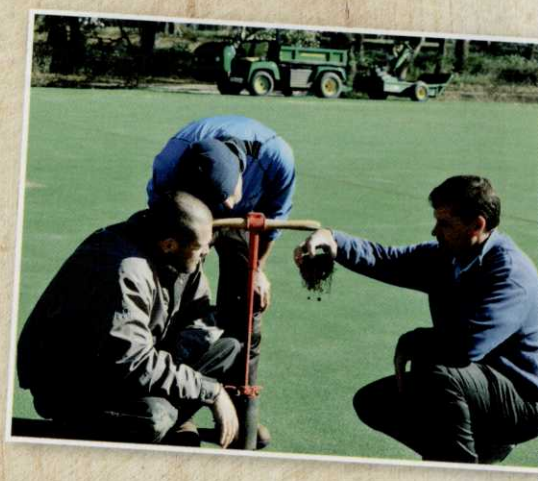
The foliar feeding program produced a superior turf than relying only on soil intake, but Poynot questioned the sustainability. Because of the current turf's limits and his desire for a greener approach, he convinced LeTriomphe owner Mike Maraist of the benefits of investing in research.

"Mike has always been tremendously supportive of whatever we've done," Poynot says. "Without him, we wouldn't have the quality surfaces that we have, and we wouldn't be putting the time and effort into this project."

The background research led to Poynot and the club installing its own turf research plot, an area that Poynot hopes will lead to innovations in regional turf grasses. "When you're dealing with grass species that are native to your area, less maintenance and fewer resources are needed," he says. "When the greens are healthy and fewer fertilizers and chemicals are needed, everyone benefits.

"Think about it... golf began in Great Britain with cool-season grasses in a cool-season environment in very sustainable soil conditions. These courses haven't been touched for a hundred years. You don't see them changing out greens every couple of decades or spending anywhere near the amount of money that we do in the U.S." GCI

Dan McDonald is a freelance writer who authors a golf column in The Lafayette Advertiser.



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