

Local Hero

Florida superintendent
hails homegrown turf
for successful greens
renovation

Problem

They looked good, they played well, but ... the greens at Lake Region Yacht & CC were in bad shape and in need of renovation.

Solution

FloraDwarf, a dense and fine-textured creeping turfgrass developed at the University of Florida. "Our greens turned out flawlessly," says superintendent R. Alan Puckett.

BY LARRY AYLWARD
MANAGING EDITOR

Nobody was blaming the golf course greens at Lake Region Yacht & CC for putting games gone awry. In fact, most members at the Winter Haven, Fla., course believed the greens were in excellent shape.

But superintendent R. Alan Puckett discovered that the greens, despite their vivid and vigorous appearance, were diseased and contaminated. He knew the greens would eventually have to be restored.

The problem

The back-nine greens were rebuilt

in 1984; the front nine were rebuilt in 1987. Problems began in 1984, when the backside greens grew in contaminated. Since the greens were renovated three years later on the frontside, Puckett and his crew had to maintain them differently, especially when verticutting.

"It was like maintaining two different entities," he says.

The backside greens contained mosaic circles. Puckett and his crew could manage the diseased spots, but only to a point.

"People didn't know we were having problems," Puckett says. "They thought the greens were fine. But puttability, aesthetics and agronomics are different."

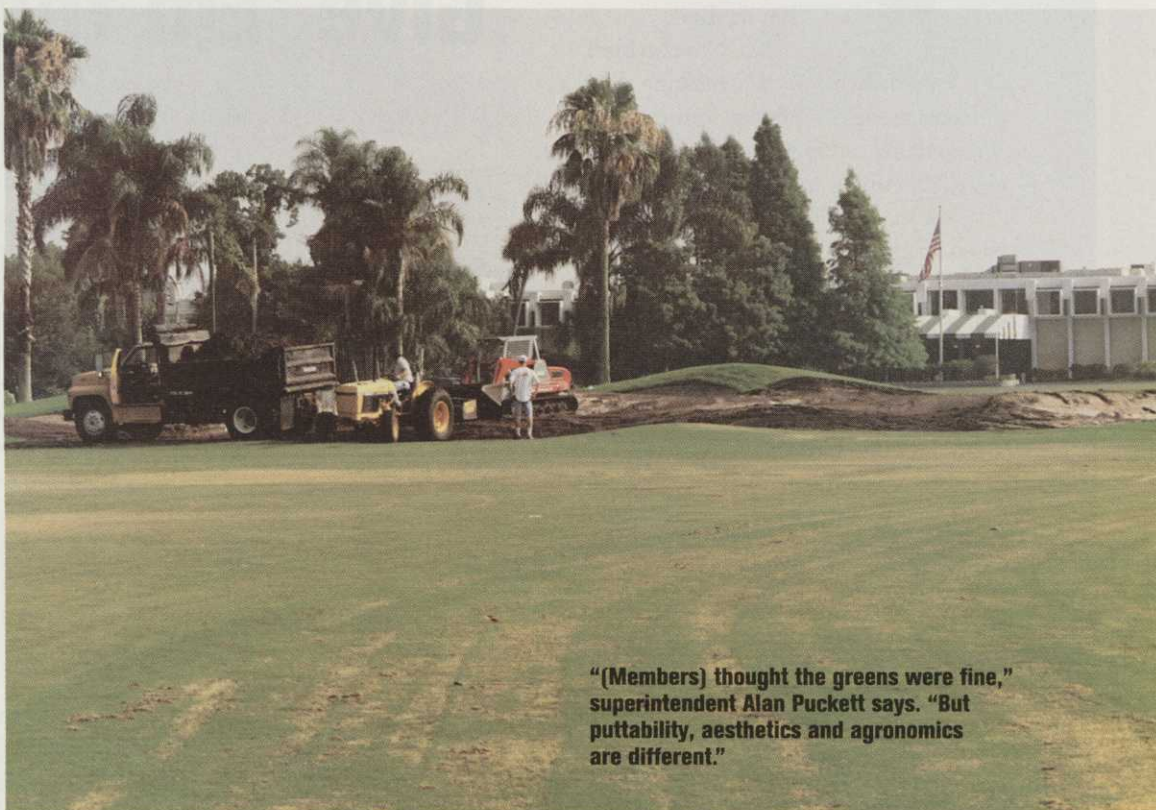
Puckett noticed the developing problem when he came to Lake Region in 1990. He also noticed

that the frontside greens were grown in with better-quality Canadian peat moss, compared to the backside greens which were grown in with Florida peat moss.

The greens deteriorated even more over time, especially in the winter during overseeding.

"The matted and contaminated spots would choke out the overseed," Puckett says, adding that areas on the greens became bare. "You couldn't keep a consistent surface. That was the final straw."

Puckett began to lobby for the greens renovation in 1995, but he had to convince his superiors and members that it was necessary. Besides not being able to see the problems with the greens, they believed the greens needed to be refurbished every 20 years, not every 12 years.



"(Members) thought the greens were fine," superintendent Alan Puckett says. "But puttability, aesthetics and agronomics are different."

"But USGA says rebuilding greens every 12 to 14 years is not uncommon in Florida," Puckett told them.

Puckett did what he could to maintain the greens and continued to campaign. His superiors finally consented to the project in the spring of 1998.

But there was another problem: cash flow. Because of a \$1.6 million clubhouse renovation, Puckett had about \$220,000 to spend on a greens renovation, which can cost up to \$350,000.

Puckett had to run like an Olympic sprinter to get the project done quickly. His mission? Get the greens done on the double so the course wouldn't be shut down for long.

The solution

Puckett studied various turfgrasses and narrowed the field to only certified grasses. He considered Tifdwarf, a nearly 30-year-old grass.

"I would have used it, and it would have been fine," Puckett admits. "But I didn't want to be that old course with that old grass six years down the road. It was a personal fear."

Puckett also considered Champion, a dense, ultra-dwarf bermudagrass. But in the end, he chose the homegrown FloraDwarf, a dense and fine-textured creeping turfgrass recently developed at the University of Florida. Puckett says the ultradwarf is used on only about 30 golf courses in the country.

Puckett had been told that FloraDwarf was more difficult to maintain — that it needed more nitrogen and verticutting. Critics also told him that it was such a tight, dense plant that it would be difficult to overseed. But

Puckett, who later discovered the criticisms were overstated, didn't hesitate on his choice.

He also looked for ways to save money on the project. For instance, after taking a soil sample, he decided it was cheaper to take out 6 inches of mat and thatch, add 6 inches of sand and till it together 12 inches down to create a good mix. "That was cheaper than putting in 12 inches of new mix," he adds.

Outcome

Puckett teamed with Rick Trombley, of Avon Park, Fla.-based Highland Golf, who acted as site foreman on the renovation. Mike Dasher, an Orlando architect, also consulted on the project.

Reconstruction on the front nine began in late June of last year. Four greens had severe undulations, which made them unplayable from some areas. Those greens also had only two or three pin placements, and they became worn in those areas. Puckett and his crew softened the greens, making them more player friendly. The greens also now have 10 to 12 pin placements.

The 2nd green was completely moved and rebuilt to make room for a parking lot. Members thought the move might ruin the hole by making it shorter, but Puckett was able to extend the hole slightly by pushing back the tee.

Puckett and crew had the front-nine greens finished in a month. Then it was on to the back nine, which they completed in two weeks. Puckett attributes the quick finish to how well he and Trombley worked together.

Grass on the back nine had grown in over the years, and the greens were smaller, Puckett says.



Superintendent Alan Puckett says he would stack FloraDwarf up against other bermudagrasses.

He and his crew enlarged the surfaces and downsized humps.

While Puckett and his crew of 13 were redoing the greens, they also decided to relevel the tees. Puckett convinced members that he could greatly improve the tees — which were slightly uneven — by renting a Rotodarian, an English-made rotary cultivator, for \$1,000.

That's not all. Crew members also replaced bunker sand and used the old sand to rebuild service roads. In addition, they constructed berms on three holes for water control. Lastly, they built a 3,000-square-foot nursery green with FloraDwarf for sod replacement.

Not surprisingly, Puckett and his crew worked days and nights. They completed their work in an astonishing 117 days. Puckett says he was at the course, which reopened Oct. 17, from sunrise to sunset for 114 of those days.

"It was a phenomenal effort on our part," he adds.

Comments

Puckett is impressed with FloraDwarf, and says he would stack it up against other

bermudagrasses. "Our greens turned out flawlessly."

Of its critics, Puckett says, "If you maintain your golf course to a high level, all of those factors are minor adjustments."

For instance, Puckett says he can cut FloraDwarf lower than Tifdwarf without damaging it. He also didn't have any overseeding problems last winter. "FloraDwarf is not as difficult to manage as I thought," he says.

He purchased the FloraDwarf from Greg Norman Turf in Avon Park, Fla. "Hands down, it's one of the cleanest fields there is," Puckett says.

Puckett knew the renovation was a success when he didn't hear any complaints after the course opened. He says some members went out of their way to comment positively on the project.

For his efforts, Puckett received a bonus and a plaque. He beams when he talks about the renovation, an obvious career highlight.

"I don't need a pat on the back, but I need to know that people notice that I'm trying," he says. ■

The New Champion

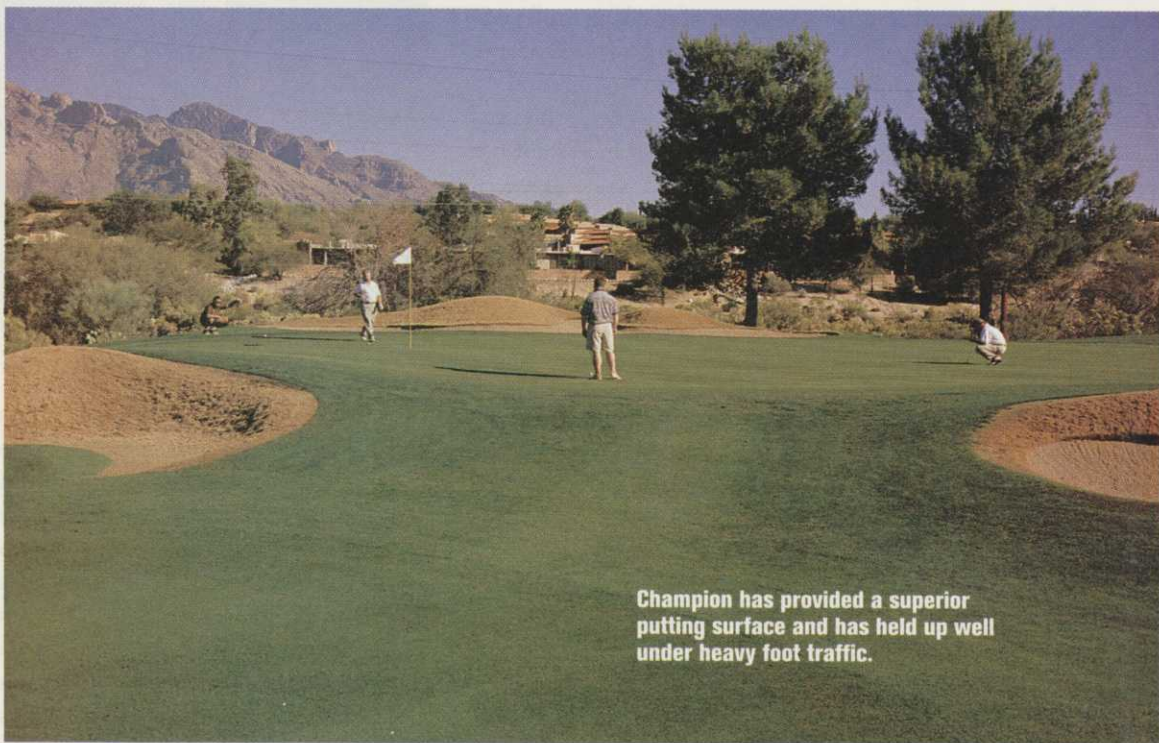
Mike Petty made a winning choice when he selected a hybrid ultradwarf bermudagrass for a greens renovation

Problem

The undersized bentgrass greens took a beating when rounds at Tucson (Ariz.) National Golf Resort doubled from 30,000 to 60,000.

Solution

A greens renovation was in order, and it was a tough and enduring bermudagrass named Champion to the rescue.



Champion has provided a superior putting surface and has held up well under heavy foot traffic.

PHOTOS BY DON DALE

BY DON DALE

In his spare time, superintendent Mike Petty partakes in desert motorcycle races. There's a part of him that likes to live dangerously.

So it's no surprise that Petty, superintendent at Tucson National Golf Resort and Spa in Tucson,



Superintendent Mike Petty relishes risky business.

Ariz., took a risk by using Champion, a hybrid ultradwarf bermudagrass, for a greens renovation in 1997.

Petty chose Champion because the course needed a tough and enduring grass to accommodate a doubling of foot traffic. Champion may have been a radical choice, but it was one Petty felt he had to make.

The problem

When Tucson National transformed from a private course to a resort course in 1983, it went from 30,000 to 60,000 rounds a year. Over the years, the undersized bentgrass greens were damaged by increased play, especially in the summer heat.

Management at Omni Hotels, owner of Tucson National, wanted to repair the greens, but discovered

that most solutions were too expensive. Petty says the best option was to improve the greens' root zones by 30 percent, increase their size and redo the bentgrass — but that would have cost \$1 million.

Another option was to find a more durable turf, and bermudagrass seemed the natural choice.

Solution

Petty selected Champion because he thought the dense-growing hybrid would provide a superior putting surface and hold up well under heavy foot traffic. But the renovation project got off to a bad start when a contractor failed to grow the sprigs into a useable sod.

However, after Petty stepped in and grew the sod himself, the renovation went smoothly and cost only about \$250,000.

"This Champion variety estab-

lished quicker than conventional bermudas," Petty says.

The turf is dense and less grainy than Tiffdwurf. "It's extremely durable, and we've had no disease problems," he says.

Outcome

Despite its durability, Petty learned Champion is not perfect. It's a high-maintenance turf that needs vigorous verticutting and topdressing because rhizomes can sprout up along the surface of the green, Petty says.

The hybrid also requires a change in fertility, and Petty has gone to more frequent applications of foliar formulations at lower than normal rates. But his biggest learning experience came from the overseeding, which he had hoped wouldn't be necessary. Petty believed Champion wouldn't require winter overseeding because of its cold tolerance. He was wrong.

"In a slightly warmer climate than Tucson, it's possible that overseeding wouldn't be necessary," Petty says, noting that he has talked to superintendents who use it successfully where it's hotter.

The first winter that his hybrid greens were in play was in 1997-98, when the Tucson Chrysler Classic was being staged at Tucson National. To protect the new turf as well as the investment, Petty, who was concerned with stories of superintendents having trouble establishing ryegrass in the dense Champion, gambled again by using a wild overseeding concoction consisting of a minimum of scalping and verticutting followed by what he calls an "interseeding" of low seeding

rates of *Poa trivialis* and bentgrass.

"People were trying to overseed it with ryegrass, which is a fairly large seed," Petty says.

He says the smaller poa and bentgrass seed settled in nicely, and he got an excellent playing surface in time for the tournament. He even had a good response from tour players regarding the greens.

Mike Brown, vice president of Bay City, Texas-based Coastal Turf, which has patented the Champion hybrid, says Petty has been adept at adopting the variety and in overseeding it in a new and untested setting.

"He has been instrumental in trying something different in the desert," says Brown, whose father, Morris, discovered the hybrid growing on a small patch of green in 1969 and isolated it.

Brown says that Petty's intuitions on the overseeding of the heat-tolerant variety were not only correct, they have since been tested by a turf scientist hired by Coastal Turf to iron out the overseeding discrepancies. He verifies that it is a high-maintenance grass that requires a lot of verticutting to flourish in the summer.

"It's strictly a putting-green grass," Brown says, adding that it would be too dense and require too much care to be used successfully on fairways. "It needs low mowing heights."

Last winter, Petty modified his overseeding program slightly. He scalped the greens more radically, then verticut in five different directions to break up the surface uniformly. He applied three types of seed: 20 pounds per thousand square feet of perennial ryegrass,

8 pounds of poa trivialis and 2 pounds of velvet bentgrass.

Petty thought the Champion was established well enough to take a thorough scalping, and he wanted to see if the rye would establish. If it did, Petty knew it would provide a nice growing canopy for the bentgrass and poa.

That's exactly what happened. When the mowing began, the ryegrass was gradually mowed out as the height of cut was reduced, leaving the two other varieties and an superb winter playing surface.

"Excellent," Petty says of golfer response last winter.

Comments

Petty is pleased with Champion, which quickly re-establishes itself in the spring. He doesn't view his extra effort as a detriment, just a learning experience.

"I'm not saying that Champion is better than bentgrass," he says. "I'm just saying that it's the turf of choice for this situation."

Brown says the variety is thriving in other warm U.S. regions, including Florida, Texas and the Gulf Coast. It is also making inroads in the Phoenix and Palm Springs, Calif., desert areas.

The corporate rationale at Tucson National is to earn more money by increasing rounds per year. More future agronomic decisions will be based on business demands, something Petty says he can't argue with.

As for his tendency to gamble on unusual varieties and cultural practices, Petty says it probably has to do with his adventurous side. Then he was off to the races. ■

Don Dale is a freelance writer who lives in Hollywood, Calif.

"I'm not saying that Champion is better than bentgrass. I'm just saying that it's the turf of choice for this situation."

Mike Petty, superintendent