

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
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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."

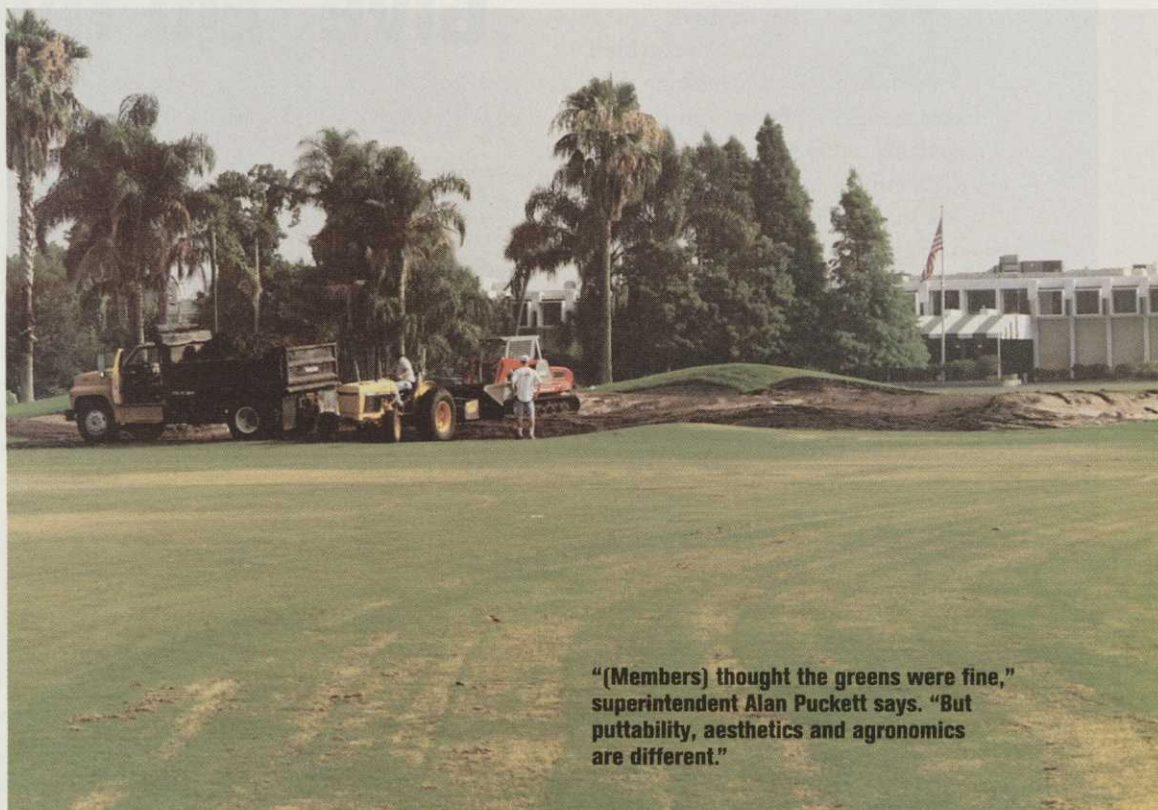
Puckett noticed the developing problem when he came to Lake Region in 1990. He also noticed

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. ■