

Maintenance

CASE STUDY

The New Champion

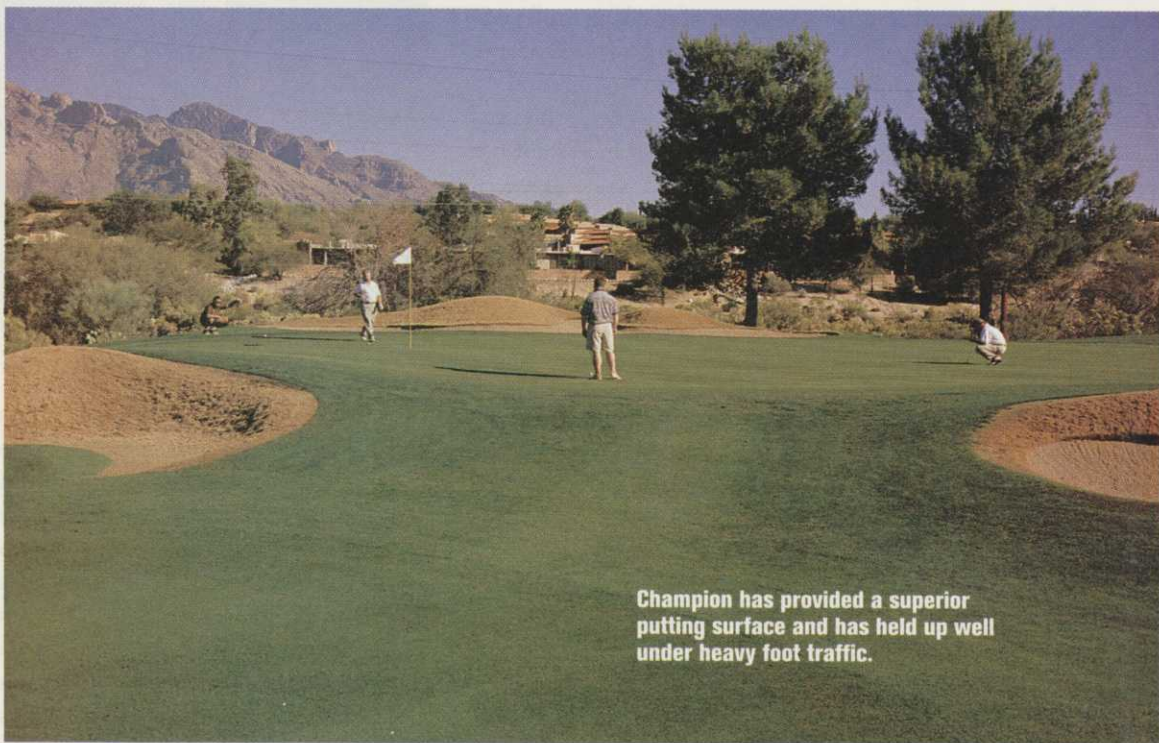
Mike Petty made a winning choice when he selected a hybrid ultradwarf bermudagrass for a greens renovation

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

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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.

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