

TifEagle Flies at Florida Course



Blooming trees and flowers frame one of the new TifEagle green at Banyan GC. Closeup of TifEagle shows micro-sized ceramics to help soil hold nutrients and water (inset).

Club's greens now possess 'tournament-like conditions' thanks to new bermudagrass variety

Problem

The Tifdwarf greens at Banyan GC were in bad shape and unacceptable for play.

Solution

Rebuild the greens, but not with Tifdwarf. Superintendent Clint Smallridge chose TifEagle, a new ultradwarf bermudagrass.

Like other greens, Tifdwarf greens shrink over the years and lose their size, shape and playability. John Foy, director of the USGA Green Section in the Florida region, says Tifdwarf greens also begin developing spots, or "off-types," five to seven years after planting. Greens with off-types have major differences in textural characteristics, growth habits and tolerances to routine maintenance when compared to healthy greens.

Over time, the off-types progress to where management programs, no matter how intense, can't keep greens up to acceptable standards for play.

"In south and central Florida and throughout the Southeast, it's not uncommon to see the regrassing of Tifdwarf putting greens every 10 to 15 years," Foy says.

At the Banyan GC in West Palm Beach, Fla., the Tifdwarf greens had reached that stage. Something had to be done, but was regrassing with Tifdwarf the answer?

The problem

Banyan GC's original greens were 25 years old and a management nightmare. The club hired CGCS Clint Smallridge in 1997, who came to Banyan with the intent to rebuild the greens, along with the entire course.

"We put in new irrigation, new drainage, new bunkers, new soil and new grass," Smallridge says. "Our goal was simple: Our members wanted a course with fast greens, good fairways and perfect bunkers."

But Smallridge ruled out replanting with Tifdwarf.

"Why open yourself up to a repeat of the purity and quality problems you're trying to fix?" he asks. "Besides, faster greens speed

was one of the membership's main priorities. For a Florida course, that left bentgrass or one of the new ultradwarfs as the only viable options."

The ultradwarfs include Floradwarf, Champion, TifEagle, MiniVerde and MS-Supreme. Many experts believe these new bermudagrass varieties can rival bentgrass and transform the play and look of putting greens throughout the southeastern United States.

The solution

Smallridge selected TifEagle and says it was an easy decision. The previous superintendent at Banyan, Dan Jones, had a test plot of TifEagle on a practice green. Over a three-year period it performed well, appeared healthy and didn't get contaminated, Smallridge says.

"It held its color well in cold weather," he adds. "It could also handle close mowings. Our only question was whether it would overseed well because it grows so tight, but that turned out not to be an issue for us. We're far enough south that we don't need to overseed."

Smallridge said the greens were sprigged in the spring of 1998, and there was 100 percent coverage in two to three weeks.

"The grass is 2 years old, and there's virtually no

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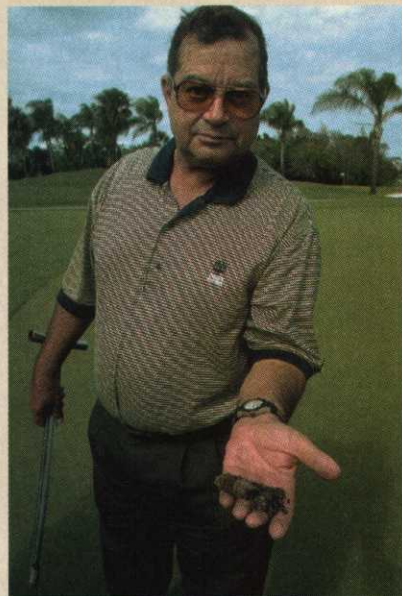
Real-Life Solutions

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matty thatch," he says. "But the agronomics of growing TiffEagle is different. It's so tight and fine [that it can almost be] impenetrable."

Outlook

If you don't keep the turf open, even

water and fertilizer have a hard time penetrating TiffEagle. Smallridge and his crew don't spike, verticut or topdress their greens often, but they do apply a micro-sized ceramic product to keep the TiffEagle open. "It has little pockets which hold nutrients, oxygen, water and bacteria — the things grass needs if



Superintendent Clint Smallridge says the TiffEagle has no matty thatch.

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it's going to grow well," Smallridge says.

The new ultradwarf varieties have a reputation for being difficult to manage, but Smallridge says most issues can be linked to improper mowing.

"Most TiffEagle problems come from someone trying to set a regular mower at one-tenth inch or lower, something [the mower] isn't designed to do," he says. "When you have a mower with a front roller and a back roller and a bed knife in between, and that front roller and back roller are anywhere from 10 to 14 inches apart, what's going to happen when you go up and over a contour? The bedknife is going to dig in and scalp. So you have to narrow the distance between your rollers so they flow with the contours."

Ultradwarfs like TiffEagle cost more to maintain, but most superintendents who use it like the tradeoff. Smallridge explains that their greens mowers are equipped with extra-thin bed knives, which must be replaced more often to maintain TiffEagle properly. The bottom line, he says, is that all equipment must be in top condition to maintain the greens.

"It's critical to be right on — every day," Smallridge says. "That's demanding. But we went from a club that was in trouble to a club that has a waiting list. Our members call the course the best-kept secret in Florida" ■