

Blazing a New Trail

The brash new bermudas are headed north, challenging bentgrass varieties as a choice for greens in new areas of the country

BY SHANE SHARP

In years past, the line that determined whether you chose bentgrass or bermudagrass for your greens in the United States was as clear as the Mason-Dixon. In the Southeast, if you were opening a golf course around or south of Myrtle Beach, S.C., bermuda was the obvious choice. The Southwest could be broken into definite zones: bentgrass for the cool winter nights of Palm Springs, Calif., and Scottsdale, Ariz.; and bermudagrass for the torrid summer days of Austin, Texas, and Phoenix.

These days, however, the line isn't so clear. New revolutionary breeds of bermudagrass, combined with myriad playing and economic considerations, are destroying the old rules of thumb as fast new golf courses are being built.

"There are more superintendents in the Dallas-Fort Worth area that have gone to ultradwarf bermudagrass," says Tom Kastler, superintendent at the Runaway Bay Golf and CC in Bridgeport, Texas. "It really looks like the trend around here. There are still some fine clubs that grow bent, but they are extremely private."

Ultradwarf bermudagrass varieties are responsible for blurring the line where bermuda-

grass greens are customary. In particular, the arrival of TiffEagle bermudagrass in the Southeast has agronomists scrambling to redraw the traditional boundaries. It can be cut down to bentgrass heights, rolls true and is tougher than a Johnny Cochran cross-examination.

"I have a slide that shows the southern boundary of bentgrass in South Carolina and Georgia," says Patrick O'Brien, director of the USGA's Southeastern Green Section. "The traditional line on the coast is Myrtle Beach, but we have one course in Hilton Head that has bentgrass greens. So where is the line now? It is disappearing. My prediction is that where we had a line in the Southeast will become murky because of new ultradwarf bermudagrass varieties."

In fact, if you are a bentgrass green in the Palmetto State, you had better find time to pray for your life. In the past 1.5 years, two courses in Myrtle Beach re-

placed their bentgrass greens with Tifeagle. In Columbia, S.C., all but two golf courses have reverted to bermudagrass. In Hilton Head — the state's premier golfing destination — bentgrass greens are limited to a few private facilities.

"If you are a resort course in Myrtle Beach, bermuda is the way to go," says Tim Guthrie, superintendent at the Tradition GC in Paw-

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leys Island, S.C. "Bermudagrass does not need to be aerified in the peak fall and spring seasons like bentgrass."

For years, the Tradition was one of the few upscale courses in the southern end of the Grand Strand to use bermudagrass on its greens. But recently, True Blue GC on Pawleys Island, S.C., and Wachesa Plantation East in Murrells Inlet, S.C., underwent major renovations that included replacing their bentgrass greens with Tifeagle.

"If every other bermudagrass was to get a virus and die, Tifeagle would be the only stand that would live," Guthrie says. "Tifeagle is the grass of the future, but even Tifdwarf can be taken to a different level if you take good care of it."

According to True Blue professional Danny Gore, the new Tifeagle greens at his award-winning Mike Strantz-designed course have been a hit with players.

"All we've had are good comments on the new greens," Gore says. "Players who have played here before are saying that they like the new greens better than the old ones. Tifeagle can roll as true as bent, but it can stand up to anything."

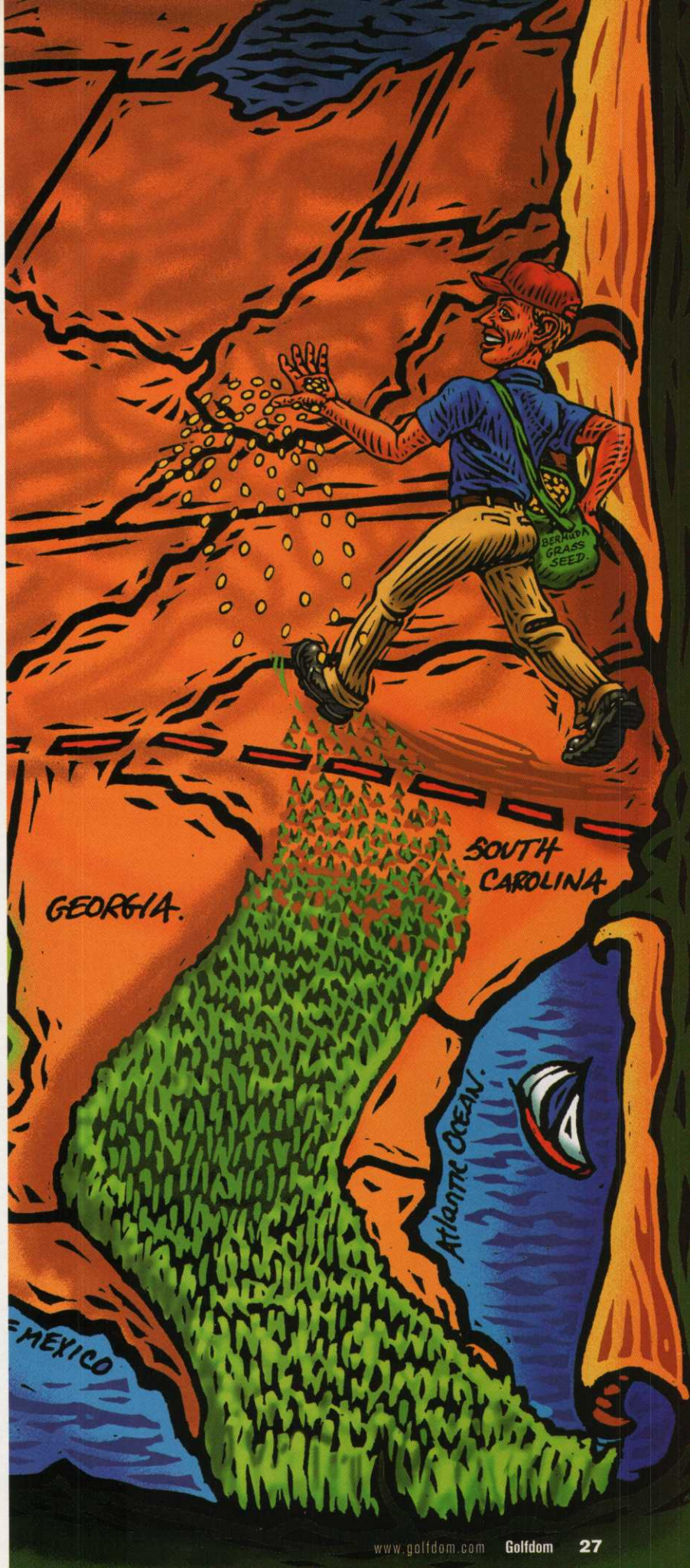
That's not to say there aren't reasons to stick with bentgrass. Tougher strands of bentgrass are being developed. Skip Lynch, director of golf and sports turf at the Seed Research of Oregon, in Corvallis, Ore., says the advances in both grass types are part of an unusual phenomenon.

"While bermudas are going further north, ryes, blues and bents are going further south," says Lynch, whose company produces SR1119 and SR1120 bentgrasses for courses in the Southeast and Southwest. "But the real determining factor for anyone who is looking at the options is, 'How much money am I going to spend to maintain it, and can I get a marketing advantage from it?'"

Among south Strand courses in the Myrtle Beach corridor, only the Tom Jackson-designed River Club hasn't switched from bent to bermuda. The course recently replaced its old bermudagrass greens with A-1 bentgrass. Jim Neely, River Club's certified superintendent, says that defying the trend is something his course doesn't mind doing to please its patrons.

"Having three courses and a resort hotel

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across the street, we get high demand for bentgrass, whether players know what they're playing on or not,” Neely says.

According to Neely, the number of annual rounds on a course determines the grass selection for greens. As part of a multi-course facility, Neely and professional Nate DeWitt spread play among the other courses at Litchfield Plantation.

“We're fortunate to have three golf courses,” Neely says. “In the summer, when the greens are under stress, we can push some play to our other courses. We have also spaced our tee times so the number of rounds [on each course] will be reduced.”

But Neely adds that any course south of Myrtle Beach hosting more than 35,000 rounds per year is taking a chance by selecting bentgrass greens over bermudagrass. O'Brien is even more specific on the future of greens in the Grand Strand.

“In Myrtle Beach, you will see a change back from bentgrass to bermudagrass,” he says. “The question is how far north can you take bermuda because it is a tropical grass. You are seeing the

first moves in the south end of Myrtle Beach, and the USGA is 100 percent behind it.”

In Georgia, the bent/bermuda line is being blurred around the Macon area. According to Bill Womac, Dunwoody CC's certified superintendent, the ultradwarf revolution hasn't arrived in Atlanta, however.

“Someone said we will have the ultradwarf grass here someday, but I just don't see it because [it lacks] cold hardiness,” Womac says. “Any club that has a private membership or an upscale public course here is going to go with bentgrass.”

Different picture

Bentgrass also seems to be losing the battle in the upscale golfing destination of Palm Springs, Calif., and in parts of the Southwest. Patrick Gross, an agronomist at the USGA's Southwest Green Section office, says climate and economics returned bermudagrass greens to favor.

“The new bermudagrass varieties are generating a lot of interest,” Gross says. “In Palm Springs, we are seeing high-end courses switching. There is always the status symbol of being

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able to use bent, but Palm Springs is no longer just a winter resort town. Resort courses want to attract players in the summer, and you can't run the number of rounds they want through bentgrass greens in 105-degree heat."

Similar to the Southeast and Palm Springs, ultradwarf bermudagrass varieties are gaining popularity in Arizona, says Mike Huck of the USGA's Southwest Green Section office.

"Bermudagrass is still the recommended grass if your course is down (South)," Huck says. "Bentgrass greens walk a thin line in Phoenix."

But Huck says that bermuda greens are no longer limited to the southern part of the state. As in South Carolina and Georgia, the bent/bermuda line is blurring in Phoenix.

"In Scottsdale, the nights are cool enough that most of the high-end courses use bent," Huck adds. "But the TPC of Scottsdale just switched from bent to bermuda, and that is not a low-end course."

Future of the line

How much the line between bent and bermuda is blurred in the Southeast and the Southwest depends on key considerations, including annual rounds, water quality and target audience.

"The decision is really based on clientele," says Wayne Horman, director of sales and marketing for The Scotts Co. "Maintaining bent in the South will always be difficult, and the trend is toward more bermuda. The ultradwarf is improving the putting surfaces so that it is becoming acceptable for high-end courses to have bermudagrass."

Acceptable is one thing; preferred is another. No matter how true it rolls, many players prefer bentgrass, according to Kastler.

"A lot of players associate bentgrass with upscale, no matter where the course is," Kastler says. "I'm a bentgrass man myself, but we only handle 26,000 rounds a year here, so we can pull it off."

According to O'Brien, the proliferation of ultradwarf bermudagrass will depend on the continued evolution of the species.

"How much the conversion occurs depends on how we assess the cold hardiness of the ultradwarf grasses," O'Brien says. "We are only in the first generation of these new ultradwarfs, and hopefully the second generation will address the cold-hardiness issues." ■

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Although ultradwarf bermudagrasses are becoming acceptable on high-end courses, a lot of players still associate bentgrass with upscale.