It's *Not* the Real Thing – But It's Close

Labor-saving synthetic turf fits Oregon course to a 'tee'

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

In February 1996, torrential rains came to Welches, Ore., located in the majestic and dense Mount Hood National Forest. At The Resort at the Mountain, a vacation spot that sports a 27-hole golf course, the rains caused floods that caused problems.

The biggest problem came with a boom and a large splash. A road on a hillside above the golf course collapsed, sending tons of debris into a spring-fed pond below. The landslide also wiped out several huge trees.

Problem

After the staff at The Resort at the Mountain decided to build new tees on a reconstructed hole, they faced another problem – how to grow healthy turf in the shady and stagnant spot where the tees were to be built.

Solution

Install a porous synthetic turf that's resistant to weather, insects, rot, mildew, fungus growth and is nontoxic.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE RESORT AT THE MOUNTAIN

Superintendent Tony Lasher and his staff transformed the destruction from a landslide into new tees by using logs from downed trees and synthetic turf.

What to do with this mess?

About a year later, the decision-makers at The Resort at the Mountain, including certified superintendent Tony Lasher, agreed to turn the destruction into a creation as part of the course's five-year remodeling plan. Lasher and company had already planned to construct new tees on the Pinecone course's fifth hole, where the cave-in took place. Now they decided to utilize the damage, so to speak.

The landslide destroyed the pond, but left a picturesque wetland in its place surrounded by several tall trees and brush. The idea was to build bridges and trails leading to three separate tee boxes in the wooded area. The tees would overlook the steelhead trout- and salmon smolt-laden wetland. Then golfers could experience a bit of Mother Nature on the environmentally sound course — and face a tough tee shot with a forced carry over the wetland between two areas of dense alders, hemlocks and douglas firs.

It was a cool idea, but not without major challenges.

The problem

It wasn't going to be easy to grow turf in the tall trees and brush, where there was minimal air movement and little sunlight. The turf would be under tremendous stress in the shady, stagnant spot where the tees were to be constructed. "We'd have had to do a lot of logging to let sunlight in," Lasher says.

In addition, Lasher and his crew would have to use plenty of fertilizer and pesticide to keep the turf alive because it was in such a poor growing area. However, plenty of fertilizers and chemicals weren't part of the course's environmentally friendly turfgrass management philosophy, especially near a wildlife-inhabited wetland.

In the end, the decision was clear. "We decided natural grass wouldn't work on the tee boxes," Lasher says.

The solution

Lasher researched using synthetic turf on the tee boxes and informally interviewed his most frequent golfers to see what they thought of the idea. If Lasher could find the right product, the golfers told him, they were all for the fake turf, especially if it provided an environmentally friendly solution.

Portland State University, located about two hours from The Resort at the Mountain, had recently installed new artificial turf for its soccer field called FieldTurf. Lasher talked to representatives from the school's soccer program, who said they were

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pleased with the product.

FieldTurf, manufactured by the Montreal-based company of the same name, is a synthetic turf that features sand and crumb rubber. Polyethylene fibers, simulating grass blades, are woven into a backing. The sand and crumb rubber are layered between the grass blades to simulate height of cut. (The rubber crumbs are made partly of recycled Nike sneakers and recycled tires.)

The porous product, designed for indoor and outdoor use, provides maximum drainage, according to the company. It's resistant to weather, insects, rot, mildew, fungus growth and is nontoxic. It's warranted from ultraviolet degradation for at least eight years.

Several pro and college football teams have turned to FieldTurf in the past few years, including the University of Nebraska and the University of Cincinnati. The Green Bay Packers and Cleveland Browns use FieldTurf at their indoor practice facilities. Major League Baseball's Tampa Bay Devil Rays use it at their Tropicana Field.

"It's awesome. It's like actual grass," says Marco Rivera, a Green Bay Packer offensive lineman.

At the time, Lasher knew of no other golf courses that had experimented with FieldTurf, with the exception of a few driving ranges that used it for mats. "We decided to give it a try," he says.

The plan was to construct five tees, three of which would measure 20 feet by 30 feet and feature the synthetic turf — comprising a total of 1,800 square feet. Two additional tees on the other side of the wetland would be constructed using natural turf, since they were in better growing conditions.

Lasher and a few crew members built the tees and installed the FieldTurf themselves. They used logs from trees downed in the landslide to build the tee boxes.

"We installed drainage in the native soil, using 4-inch perforated drain pipe," Lasher says. "We placed sand on top of it. Then we laid the [synthetic turf] rug on top of the sand. It was just like we were building a sand-based tee with real grass growing on it."

When the rug is in place, sand and crumb rubber are layered in.

"If you want 1-inch grass, you fill it halfway with the sand and crumb rubber," Lasher says. "We filled it up so we had 1/2-inch grass, which is the same height of the grass on our other tees."

Outcome

At the time of the renovation, Lasher told The Resort's owner, Ed Hopper: "We're either being real innovative or real stupid [by installing synthetic turf.] Only time will tell."

Time has revealed a successful story. The tees, which opened in June 1999, have been "overwhelmingly successful," Lasher says. As long as golfers can tee up their balls on a level surface, they don't mind doing it off synthetic turf. Some golfers don't even realize they're teeing off fake turf.

Golfers don't mind teeing it off the environmentally friendly synthetic turf.

How does Lasher like it? Let him count the ways:

- He doesn't have to worry about the turf receiving proper air movement and sunlight.
- He doesn't have to worry about providing irrigation to the tees, which would have been a major project.
- He doesn't have to worry about mowing the tees, which would have taken someone at least an hour a day to do.
- He doesn't have to worry about applying fertilizers and pesticides on an environmentally sensitive site.

In fact, the tees require minimal labor. Two times a month during the course's busy season, a crew worker must rake the "grass" because it becomes matted down.

Lasher admits he was afraid his peers might think he "sold out" by using synthetic turf, but he says the opposite has occurred. Fellow superintendents are impressed with FieldTurf and how Lasher used it to solve a challenging problem.

"If we wanted to expose 50,000 golfers to a unique setting and address the problems involved, this was the only solution," Lasher says of the tee renovation, which cost about $19,000 — $12,500 for the log work and bridges, and about $6,500 for the FieldTurf.

It's ironic, really. Usually in such situations, a superintendent who goes the extra mile to do something right for the environment creates a lot of work for himself and his workers in the process. In contrast, FieldTurf delivered the product without the increased maintenance.

"We hope that golfers will enjoy the changes to hole, but we also hope to show people that it's possible to successfully create a partnership between great golf and Mother Nature," Lasher says. ■