



# They champion

The PGA Golf Club  
extolls the roll on its new  
ultradwarf bermudagrass greens

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

**P**ardon Bud Taylor if he drops to his knees and plants a smooch on one of the new greens at the PGA Golf Club. Yes, Taylor, director of golf at the club, adores the recently renovated greens that much.

It has been almost a year since the PGA Golf Club's two golf courses in Port St. Lucie, Fla., were rebuilt and reseeded with Champion ultradwarf bermudagrass. Taylor is happier than a man who just scored a hole-in-one because the greens, which turn 1-year-old in July, are performing like a loaded Lexus. And when the greens are good, the golfers are content, which makes Taylor's job that much easier.

"When the greens are good, the hot dogs taste better, and the whole golfing experience is better," says Taylor, who's in his 11th year at the club, operated by PGA Golf Properties.

It was superintendent Dale Miller's idea to reseed the greens with Champion. Miller was hired by the PGA Golf Club to head the renovation, most of which has been completed. Miller, who left the club in March, says he has participated in about 30 golf course renovations throughout the country, mostly in the South. He has a toolbox full of his favorite gadgets to use in the process. When a course's greens require an overhaul, Miller grabs a bag of Champion ultradwarf bermudagrass from the box.

Champion, released in 1995, was the first ultradwarf cultivar in the country. It has been planted on 335 courses in 16 states, according to Champion Turf Farms, the Bay City, Texas-based breeder and marketer of the variety. "The nice thing about Champion is that it rivals bentgrass, but it's a Southern grass," Miller says.

The PGA Golf Club celebrated its 10th anniversary last year and made the announcement it would invest several million to redo the Tom Fazio-designed North and South courses, whose names were changed to the Ryder Course and the Wanamaker Course, after the renovation. Miller made the case that Champion should be used to renovate the greens. After hearing him out on the variety's benefits, the PGA Golf Club's brass, including Taylor, agreed with him.

Miller might know Champion better than most superintendents. He first used the variety on greens in the mid-1990s when he was the superintendent at Barton Creek Resort & Spa in Austin, Texas. That was almost two years before any other courses began using it, he says.

"I was rolling the dice a little bit at Barton



# Champion

Creek when I put it in," Miller admits, saying he knew little about the variety then.

But now that he has used Champion on several courses, Miller believes it's a safe bet to achieve first-rate greens. He calls Champion a reliable variety that provides quality conditions throughout the year.

"I've carried Champion with me from golf course to golf course that I've renovated," Miller says. "And time and time again, every

place that I've helped renovate has had the same excellent results."

Miller says Champion can endure southern Florida's searing-hot summers as well as the region's cool winter nights. He is impressed with Champion's wear tolerance, which is attributable to its high density.

"It withstands traffic probably better than any grass I know," Miller says.

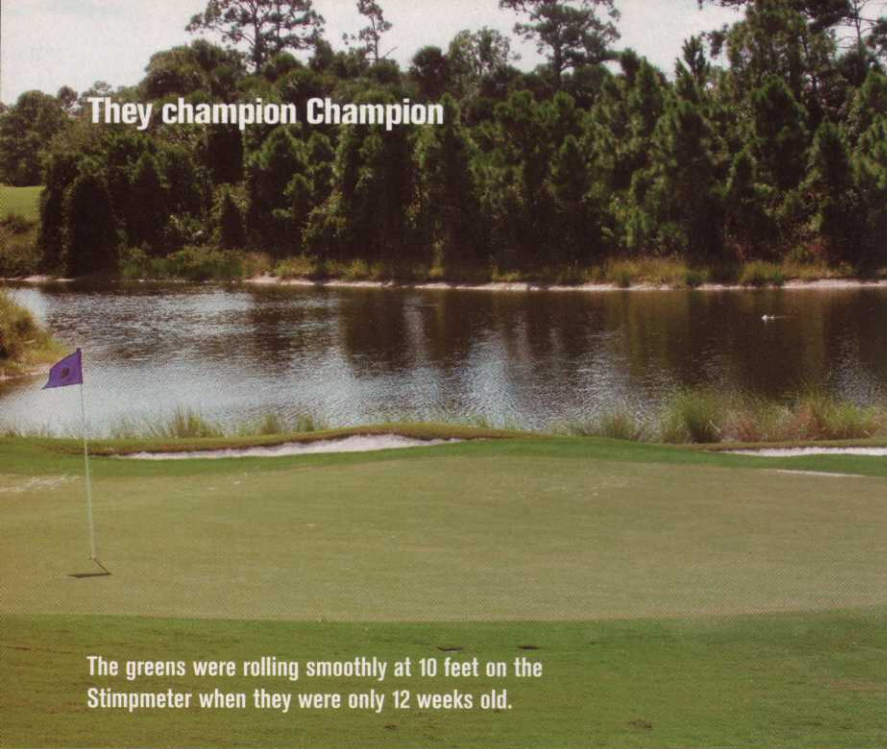
*Continued on page 30*



Bud Taylor (left), the PGA Golf Club's director of golf, is smiling because the club's new greens are performing admirably. At right is Dale Miller, the superintendent who suggested Champion bermudagrass for the renovation.



## They champion Champion



The greens were rolling smoothly at 10 feet on the Stimpmeter when they were only 12 weeks old.

"I don't miss trying to sell a golf course that's transitioning in or out of overseed."

**BUD TAYLOR**

*Continued from page 27*

According to Champion Turf Farms, the variety makes "a profusion of lateral stems, which provide very rapid recovery from injury."

The PGA Golf Club needed a durable variety to withstand the traffic from the organization's 1,300 members, not to mention the number of tournaments played on the courses. With Champion, the club was able to hold two tournaments only 13 weeks after the greens were seeded, a testament to the variety's sturdiness, says Taylor, adding that no bermudagrass variety has impressed him more.

The PGA Golf Club's clientele is impressed, too, Taylor says. "The people who have been here before notice a significant change," he adds.

An issue in the turfgrass selection for the greens renovation was whether to overseed. Champion made that decision easy because it's more cool-weather tolerant than other bermudagrass varieties and retains its color in the fall and winter. Hence, it does not require overseeding, which has given the club a leg up on the competition, Taylor says.

Not having to overseed gives the PGA Club an advantage at a time of the year when other golf courses close for overseeding. So there are no transition periods to worry about. Instead of overseeding in October and November, the club will have favorable turf conditions, rather than the in-between kind of conditions that most golf courses have at that time of year, Taylor and Miller say.

Not having to overseed not only makes superintendents and their maintenance crews happy, it pleases directors of golf like Taylor. Let's just say golfer complaints are down significantly in Taylor's department now that overseeding is a thing of the past.

"I don't miss trying to sell a golf course that's transitioning in or out of overseed," says Taylor, noting that guest concerns were always "significant" when overseeding was involved. "It was always a concern because we were at the mercy of the weather," he adds, noting that there is little margin for error in Florida when overseeding.

Last fall and winter, Taylor says the greens held their color well and playing conditions were as consistent as they have ever been. The greens retained their color, even after being frosted on a few cold winter nights.

It takes Champion-seeded greens about one year to mature, Miller says. That said, they grow in desirably quickly. The greens were rolling smoothly at 10 feet on the Stimpmeter when they were only 12 weeks old.

Before planting Champion on the Ryder and Wanamaker courses, the PGA Golf Properties tested the variety on the greens at the PGA Country Club, located a few miles from the PGA Golf Club.

"We did somewhat of an experiment at the country club," Taylor says. "We knew from the response that we received there — the rave reviews — that it would be a home run [at the club's courses]. The greens continue to mature and get better at the country club, and we expect the same results at the golf club."

Like many varieties, the biggest challenge in maintaining Champion is keeping it healthy in this golf course world of low-as-you-can-go cutting heights to appease the demand for faster greens, Miller says. But Champion can handle the low heights better than other varieties, he maintains.

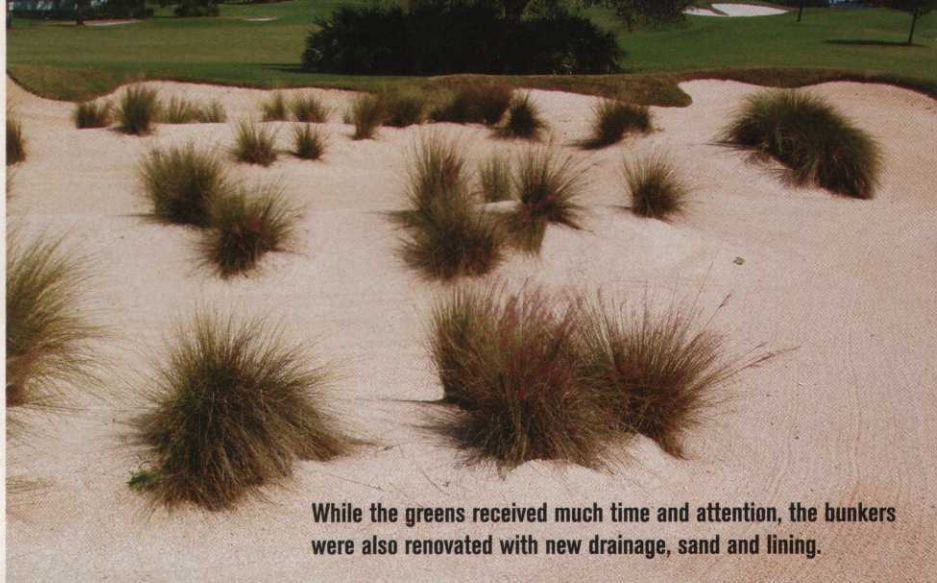
"It's not unheard of to see Champion go significantly lower than one-eighth of an inch," he adds.

Miller remembers in the early 1990s when superintendents began "pushing the envelope" and mowing greens at one-eighth of an inch to speed up ball roll. The decision came back

*Continued on page 32*



## They champion Champion



While the greens received much time and attention, the bunkers were also renovated with new drainage, sand and lining.

*Continued from page 30*

to haunt some of those superintendents with sick turf, Miller adds.

That's when Champion was introduced.

It's easy to get Champion greens rolling at 10 feet on the Stimpmeter, Miller says. And 12 and 13 feet are never out of reach. "That was unheard of 10 years ago," he adds.

Champion also displays excellent disease tolerance, despite heavy traffic and low mowing heights, Miller says. That said, Taylor says the maintenance crew is careful when it manages Champion, which when injured will take longer to recover. Hence, verticutting and grooming practices are light during the hot summer months.

### Keeping Up With the Competition

The greens are as smooth as LeBron James sailing through the air on his way to the hoop. The bunkers are as handsome as Leonardo DiCaprio in a tuxedo.

The PGA Golf Club's Wanamaker and Ryder golf courses look like they just received an expensive makeover. They should, because they're fresh off a multi-million-dollar renovation. The courses, known as the North and South before the renovation, reopened last fall with new names after being closed for six months.

The PGA Golf Club, located in Port St. Lucie, Fla., debuted 11 years ago. It is the only public PGA facility in the country. When it opened, the PGA's goal was to provide a world-class golfing experience. Ten years later, the PGA decided it wanted to take that experience to another level. Last May, while celebrating the club's 10th anniversary, the PGA brass announced plans for the renovation, which was headed by Tom Fazio's design team, the courses' original architects.

"Our goal has been to keep pace with the changes that are necessary in all golf facilities," says Brian Whitcomb, vice president of the PGA of America.

Ten years might not seem like a long time, but it is in the ever-changing, got-to-stay-up-to-date golf business. Rounds might be flat across the country, but competition is at a premium, and golf courses are still battling for wallet share. And South Florida is a very aggressive and very competitive market from a standpoint of new development.

One of the renovation's goals was to provide a facility that's enjoyable for all golfing skill sets because it's open to the public, but to retain its championship characteristics for the talented PGA members who play the club and for other top-caliber players who play in the club's national tournaments.

— Larry Aylward

While the greens at the PGA Club received much time and attention as part of the renovation, other course areas weren't overlooked.

The bunkers were a primary component of the renovation. The club has about 250 bunkers on its two courses — almost 350,000 square feet — and many are maintenance intensive because of their high faces. The bunkers would wash out after heavy rains, and it would take up to 10 staff members three or four days to repair them at a cost of almost \$7,000.

The bunkers were completely renovated with new drainage, sand and lining. The bunkers' faces were modified to let less water enter them during storms. Now that the bunkers have been renovated, it takes about five staff members four hours to repair them at a cost of about \$800 after a heavy rain.

The course's drainage was also improved.

"We improved infiltration into all of the catch basins," Miller says, citing organic buildup in the soil as a hindrance to drainage.

Another component of the renovation involves the PGA Golf Club's 10-year deal with Jacobsen to be "The Exclusive Turf Equipment Supplier to PGA Golf Properties" and "The Official Turf Equipment Supplier to the PGA of America." The club's equipment fleet includes fairway mowers, triplex mowers and walking greens mowers. Another reason Jacobsen was selected is because it's a leader in electric technology. Taylor and others believe electric equipment would benefit the maintenance operation in myriad ways, from reducing gas consumption to using quieter equipment.

And by going electric, the new Champion greens will be safe from the threat of hydraulic leaks posed by gas engines. ■