



# Brown Deer's Gamble With Washed Sod

By Rob Schultz

It's not an impossible dream.

The Greater Milwaukee Open is at the crossroads with its move to Brown Deer Golf Course. The future of the tournament may hinge on how well Brown Deer's 9th and 18th greens perform this September after they were sodded with the new washed-sod method in May.

Dr. Frank Rossi thinks it can be done. But it will take some skillful work by the grounds crew, some luck from the weather and some intelligence by Milwaukee County officials.

"It's very much dependent on good weather. He's doing good there. The second thing is how aggressive a top dresser, verticutter and mower he is. He must be very aggressive top-dressing and must be willing to let those greens look lousy for a little while and skin them down," said Rossi, an assistant professor of turfgrass management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "And the other critical thing with the GMO, and it's my recommendation, is to keep the public off of them."

Rossi feels there's an 80 percent chance that the PGA Tour pros will be content with the greens under those conditions he just described. He said there's no chance the PGA Tour pros will be content with the greens if Milwaukee County officials let the public play on them prior to the tournament.

"That would be a nightmare," said Rossi. "If I'm responsible for the GMO and I know everything I know, there's no way the public plays on those greens. No way."

"This first year, I don't think they can have their cake and eat it too. I think they're setting themselves up. The pros, if they come up here and have lousy greens, they're not going to come up here anymore. A lot of them scout out ahead of time, and if they hear they're lousy, they won't come. I'm concerned."

Rossi doesn't need to look far past his office to use an example of how quickly washed-sod greens can show wear. Madison's Odana Hills used washed sod on two of its greens last fall, opened them a few days before the Memorial Day weekend and, by mid-June, they were showing wear and tear.

"If I'm (GMO executive director) Tom Strong I need to give those greens every opportunity to succeed," Rossi said. "And putting wear on them, at best, will set them back two weeks. At worst, it sets them back a month to two months. Wear doesn't do them any good."

"Wear stresses the plants. When you put golfers on there you get scuffing. If you try to get them ready for a tournament prior to the GMO and start rolling them and packing them better than they ought to be, then he sets up compaction problems."

"But the biggest thing is the scuffing of the spikes. You

get 200 golfers a day on a concentrated area on tender seedlings is dangerous. Even though it's washed sod, that grass is still barely a year old."

If history means anything, don't expect Milwaukee County officials to use great wisdom in their handling of this issue. When it comes to Brown Deer, they have been penny-wise and pound-foolish in every critical matter.

They closed the course too late—they wanted to get a few more greens fees during a warm September—a few years ago when they re-seeded the entire course with bentgrass and the results were disastrous. They ended up opening the course months after it was scheduled to re-open.

Then, last year, construction of six new greens on the course started late. The seeding process didn't begin until September and the 9th and 18th greens weren't seeded until early October.

"That's too late," said Jim Latham from his United States Golf Association's Green Section regional office in Milwaukee. "Even the highway department won't plant anything after September 15."

The design of the new greens was done by architects Andy North and Roger Packard. North was critical of the comment made by Latham and by the lack of communication among GMO and county officials regarding the greens.

First, North said, dormant seed was used on the 9th and 18th greens. He also felt GMO, Milwaukee County officials and the grounds crew didn't give the greens enough time to recover before ripping them up and using washed sod.

North also said he doesn't want the paying public on Brown Deer's new greens before the tournament. But GMO and Milwaukee County officials held a press conference in May to announce that Brown Deer is on track to impress PGA Tour golfers in August and re-open all its holes for play to the public sometime by mid-summer. Also, a Wisconsin State Golf Association junior event is scheduled there for August.

At that press conference, Strong announced that Allan MacCurrach, senior agronomist for the PGA Tour, was pleased with the direction Brown Deer is heading during a visit to the course recently.

"(MacCurrach) gave us a big thumbs-up and told us the course will be ready, without question," said Strong. "We're excited about it."

Also, golf course superintendent Greg Milota, who just began his job there May 2, showed reporters the washed sod at the 9th and 18th greens.

"They already are to the point where they are tacking down and there's a good layer of soil from the green attached to the roots. Everything is on schedule with these greens," Milota said.

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Milota, who moved to Milwaukee after working several years at a golf in Portsmouth, Va., also pointed out to reporters that the other seeded greens were making tremendous progress.

"Within the past few weeks since I've been here, the (seeded) greens have really popped with the warmer weather," Milota said. "We're taking a considerable number of clippings off these greens on a daily basis."

There's no getting around the fact that Brown Deer had a serious problem and now they are working extremely hard to get the greens in shape and to convince the PGA Tour and the golfing public that everything will be OK. Spin control is the word of the day in Milwaukee.

Rossi was unimpressed by the fact that the washed sod had already rooted in two weeks. "That's nothing. The fact they rooted means nothing. Of course they'll root, they have no soil on them. That's a non-comment," he said.

But Rossi is impressed with the effort put forth by Milota and his crew. "He has to be careful with his nitrogen because if he gets too much grass it'll be hard to get rid of it and for the ball to roll properly," he said. "He could also set himself up for disease problems and the fungicides he might use could slow growth down. It's not an ideal situation but there's a possibility he could pull this off.

"The key is to keep play off."

The washed-sod method has been used in New Zealand for years and just recently caught on in the United States. Rossi wishes the method had stayed in New Zealand.

Washed sod is to golf course management what fast-food is to your diet. Both create a quick-fix to your problem, but the long-range effects can be disastrous.

"The superintendents I've talked to and the greens I've looked at after three or four years, my opinion is that you're better off seeding," said Rossi, who disagrees that the method is cost-effective because greens are back in play quicker. "I don't see any benefit to that because you're on those greens too quickly and start wearing it too quickly, the long-term effect is that they become *poa* infected. "We sacrifice a lot of things short-term to satisfy the golfer, but long-term the sacrifices are even greater." ♣

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