



My Summer Internship at Ballyneal: Getting Down with Brown!

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I am a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison majoring in Soil Science-Turf Management in hopes of one day becoming a golf course superintendent. From 2004 to 2007 I was on both the maintenance and construction crews at Erin Hills Golf Course in Erin, Wisconsin. With summer of 2009 fast approaching, I wanted to share some of my internship experiences from 2008, as it was a great adventure.

Since I was headed into my senior year, I wanted to try something different that would challenge my turf knowledge and give me ample opportunities to expand my abilities. I sought an internship that would take me out of my comfort zone, yet still allow me to work with cool-season grasses. Ballyneal Golf and Hunt Club in Holyoke, Colorado was the perfect fit for my goals. This prestigious club, which is located in the plains east of the Rocky Mountains, was founded in 2006 as a walking only club. The course is quite rugged as it was carved between, over, and around large sand hills that extend down through Nebraska and into north-eastern Colorado.

Maybe the most interesting aspect, and the main reason I chose to spend my summer at Ballyneal, is that the course is nearly 100% fine fescue. This makes it one of the only courses in the country with fine fescue greens. Adding to the difficulty of maintaining fescues at greens height is an extremely harsh climate, which is highlighted by temperatures that often reach 100 F, consistently strong winds, and very little summer rain. All these factors contributed to make my summer 2008 internship an



Dave Hensley, Ballyneal's golf course superintendent and author Brendan Dolan in front of the club's entrance.

extremely rewarding and informative experience.

The greatest challenge that superintendent Dave Hensley and crew at Ballyneal faced is maintaining fine fescue greens. The greens are a combination of several species of fine fescue combined with a little bit of colonial bentgrass. Since fescues cannot withstand mowing heights as low as bentgrass, the greens at Ballyneal are maintained at 0.220 inches with some fluctuation throughout the growing season. Thus, unlike a typical bentgrass green where the goal is to create a stand of turf that completely covers the soil, the exact opposite is true at Ballyneal. To get greens speeds at ideal conditions on a daily basis it is imperative on fine fescue greens that the turf stand be healthy but that some sand be seen through the canopy. Therefore the greens are kept on a mean and lean fertility plan of less than 2 lbs of N/M a year. It was indeed interesting to see how quick and smooth the greens were throughout the summer even though the mowing height was higher and turf density lower than an average putting green.

Another interesting problem that had to be dealt with was the effect of the colonial bentgrass on the greens. Due to the creeping nature of the colonial bentgrass, the areas where this grass type was thriving, green speeds were slower as the stand of turf was much denser than areas that were dominated by fine fescues. Therefore we tried a number of different cultural practices in these areas to thin them out. Twice during the summer we aggressively broomed the greens with a pull behind greens broom, which was then directly followed by mowing them in the opposite direction. Areas or greens with extremely large stands of colonial bentgrass were even manually brushed and then mowed a number of times throughout the summer.

I did not expect that Ballyneal would even have reels for vertical mowing, yet on several occasions throughout the summer areas with colonial bentgrass and thicker stands of fescues were aggressively verticut. Colonial bentgrass stands were difficult to deal with, but through a number of unique cultural practices we were able to pre-



Some severe summer stress on Ballyneal's 11th green. With irrigation and rain the turf was able to recover



The 6th hole at Ballyneal, as a storm rolls in!

sent consistent and enjoyable putting surfaces at Ballyneal.

Particular care was taken each and every day in deciding when to mow and roll greens. There were a couple times during the summer where greens did not get mowed three days in a row due to high temperatures, as the fescue slows down its growth when it is under stress. This was quite a shock to me as I was used to seeing greens mowed on a daily basis in my past experiences. Instead of mowing the greens we often rolled, but on certain days only new hole locations were cut. There were a number of key factors, including temperature stress, wear tolerance, and growth rates that played into Dave Hensley's decision process of how to maintain the greens on a daily basis. Often when heat stress was going to be extremely high, greens were neither mowed nor rolled. Due to fescues relatively low growth rate, mowing was skipped quite often during the summer months and the greens were only rolled. By altering the daily maintenance practices on the greens it severely reduced wear and stress which promotes healthy fine fescue.

I learned a lot of good tactics on how to deal with severe water restrictions while out at Ballyneal. In the summer of 2006 during grow in; Colorado received very little rain causing Hensley to turn off a number

of heads on the perimeters of the playing corridors to conserve water. Even with some heads turned off the new turf was still under irrigated and the club adopted the motto of "Get down with brown". They have continued to use this motto to guide them in their irrigation practices. Hensley has adopted deep and infrequent irrigation practices, to encourage deep rooting, and it is not uncommon to see a number of humps and hillocks throughout your round that only have a small tinge of green. A soil probe became my best friend as we were constantly checking soil moisture to determine if irrigation was needed. This past summer I put into practice a number of irrigation tools that will help me conserve water, which will be a major benefit in the future.

Another reason I chose to intern at Ballyneal was that they did an intern switch with the heralded Sand Hills Golf Club in Mullen, Nebraska. We also volunteered at the U.S. Senior Open at the Broadmoor Resort in Colorado Springs. Both of these experiences were extremely rewarding as I learned a great deal. Sand Hills was interesting as their fairways are primarily fine fescue, but they have cart traffic and the owner prefers that the turf is kept green. Without water restrictions their irrigation practices are extremely different than those at

Ballyneal, as they irrigate more often to help deal with the cart stress. They also had a different approach to disease management. Ballyneal is fortunate to have very little disease pressure and thus Dave preferred to use cultural practices to handle possible problems and only if necessary use fungicides. At Sand Hills they used fungicides as both a curative and preventative tool. Seeing how both of these high profile clubs dealt with issues differently showed me that there are many ways to get the job done right.

The U.S. Senior Open was another great experience. Volunteering at this prestigious tournament showed me the infrastructure and organization that is needed to run an event of this size. These two experiences greatly added to my summer internship as I learned a number of important lessons.

The summer of 2008 was a great experience that will only help me as I pursue a career in the golf industry. The lessons I learned about turf management are invaluable, but more importantly my 2008 internship furthered my understanding of the importance of teamwork and my love for the game and the industry. I am extremely thankful and grateful for the opportunity that Dave Hensley and the Ballyneal family afforded me, as it was truly a summer to remember! 🌱