



Reflections in the desert

The desert sun reflected off the shiny sea of Mercedes, Jaguars, and BMWs with a vengeance, assaulting my tender eyes. "So this is Palm Springs," I thought, squinting, walking through The Springs Club's parking lot. (We weren't really in Palm Springs but Rancho Mirage, Calif., and that's close enough.)

My tour guide was Mel Robey, turfgrass instructor at the College of the Desert in nearby Palm Desert. In 1987, he'd offered to show me around "a few of the 75 golf courses in this area." It was nearly four years later, and there were now more than 80 courses, but I finally took him up on it.

Robey, former superintendent for Purdue University's 36 golf holes, had the perfect preface to our tour of the area: "People expect better maintained golf courses around here because of the money they pay and what they see on television."

What he didn't say is that many of the tournaments Palm Springians see on television are taking place in their own backyards—literally.

Robey maintains a close working relationship with many of the Coachella Valley's golf course superintendents, including Ross O'Fee, a transplanted New Zealander who's now at The Springs Club. O'Fee is also president of the Hi-Lo Desert GCSA and a born talker who began our conversation by agreeing with Robey.

"If members see changes happening on their course, they don't get bored," he said. "But one of the problems with being a superintendent around here is that you're constantly being compared to the other courses."

For that reason, superintendents in the Coachella Valley form a close fraternity, O'Fee notes. Similar demands are placed on them by their high-rolling members. This situation has led to lots of equipment-swapping among supers and other cooperative efforts.

O'Fee mows his bentgrass greens at $\frac{9}{64}$ th of an inch. That's right: bentgrass greens, here in the heart of the desert.

"The trend around here is away from bermudagrass greens," O'Fee notes. "Bentgrass is faster than bermuda, and that's what our golfers want."

While most other Californians are experiencing water bans resulting from a five-year drought, those nestled at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains have their own little aquifer that will supposedly supply the area with water for hundreds of years to come. Hence the trend toward the higher water-use bentgrass.

Bentgrass vs. bermudagrass is a controversy we'll explore more fully in our August issue. But for now, wave with us—if you will—at Ross O'Fee and Mel Robey disappearing in the rear-view mirror as we high-tail it out of the lush Coachella Valley, through the desert, back toward La-la-land and the long flight home.

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