

Bent fairways from *Poa annua* are working at Westwood

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

Walter Montross of Westwood Country Club in Vienna, Va. undertook the herculean task of converting 95 percent *Poa annua* fairways to Pennlinks bentgrass in 1990. The key to the program's success was simply ceasing management of the fairways and letting the poa die out, and then giving Mother Nature some help.

"We encouraged the poa to re-emerge," Montross remembers, "and then blew it away with Roundup.

"It was a radical change. Our fairways had been 95 percent poa for the past 15 years. Many of us in the Mid-Atlantic area are concerned about overseeding bermudagrass with rye, but the deciding factor

was length of dormancy in this area."

Not too many years ago, bentgrass might not have been a viable choice for fairways in the transition zone. But with improvements in mowing techniques, pesticides and irrigation, it seemed right.

"It doesn't cost a penny more to maintain bentgrass rather than rye," Montross observes, "but you have to watch traffic under droughty conditions, and there's no overseeding."

The entire project cost \$39,000: \$7500 for irrigation modification, \$3500 for drainage tile, \$15,000 for seed, \$6,000 for renovation chemicals, \$7000 for Bayleton and Subdue fungicides.

"I never thought I had a choice," the veteran superintendent says. "When I was hired, I was given a mandate for change. We talked about doing it little by little, but I said let's bite the bullet and do the whole thing at once.

"I had confidence that I could do it, but I also had a tremendous amount of support from my old college professor Doug Hawes, the University of Maryland, Virginia Tech, the USGA, the people at Burning Tree and other superintendents.

"The process itself was seat-of-the-pants. In a way I was very naive because I didn't anticipate the problems that two inches of thatch could cause."

Westwood's number 18. 'It doesn't cost a penny more to maintain bentgrass rather than rye,' says Walter Montross.





Die, poa, die

The course closed one day (Aug. 30th), during which Roundup non-selective herbicide was sprayed. Renovation began on Sept. 7th when the fairways were aerated three and four times with a Toro fairway aerator.

During the renovation, the fairways were closed, and golfers had two options: hit from the tees, and play the following shots from the rough to complete the hole. The second—and most popular option—was to play shorter-cut roughs as “par 3” holes.

Before seeding, Scott’s Starter Fertilizer (19-5-26) was applied to the fairways.

“Then we cross-seeded with Pennlinks+Nutricote, two pounds of treated seed per 1000 square feet,” Montross remembers. “We used a tennis court roller to roll them.”

“We did a decent sales job,” Montross remembers, “but a lot of the membership was leery. Four days after seeding, we saw seedling emergence, and that brought an audible sigh of relief from the club.”

The fairways were rolled on the 12th day. (“Members thought we were cutting the grass.”) Country Club 18-3-12 fertilizer was applied three times.

On the 18th day after seeding, “the poa started to out-compete the bent where the

bent was thin, but crown damage on the young turf was the most frustrating thing I went through,” Montross says.

Mowing began on the 22nd day after seeding with a Toro 223D modified five-plex. “Once mowing was initiated, the turf started performing well,” he notes.

Maintenance crews had to take extra care with divots—which were “extensively topdressed”—the rest of the fall. The course reopened Oct. 14th with the Virginia state high school championship, and cart restrictions were lifted in mid-November.

“We were like a ghost town for 40 days, then everybody wanted to play,” Montross remembers.

A sunny epilogue

Since renovating, Montross has “sort of used everything under the sun,” including Dimension, Embark, Scott’s TGR, Primo, Cutless, Betasan and pre- and post-emergence crabgrass herbicides.

“We’ve been on a Prograss program, full bore, since 1994, and that’s what we’ll continue on,” Montross observes.

The fairways are now 80 percent bentgrass and 20 percent *Poa annua*. They are mowed at ½ inch, and thatch has been reduced to ½ inch through extensive core aeration.

Montross, who became a GCSAA-certified superintendent in 1984, cautions

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other superintendents who may be considering total fairway renovations.

“Many people jump into these programs and don’t realize the potential loss of revenue,” he says. “We estimated 35 percent loss of play, but it was 90 percent—\$60,000 total over the 40 days we were closed. Some of that we did recoup when we opened the course back up.”

Today, Montross looks back on the experience as “the highlight of my career. Success begets success, so we’ve been fortunate to be able to do a lot of other fun things since then.

“After last year’s fiasco with gray leaf spot destroying the rye,” Montross concludes, “a lot more superintendents around here are looking at bentgrass as a viable alternative.”

Montross is a 1975 graduate of the University of Maryland. He’s been president of the Greater Washington GCSA and the Mid-Atlantic Association of Golf Course Superintendents, and he served as a director of the Virginia Turfgrass Council for three years. He was superintendent at Springfield Golf and Country Club before going to Westwood. □