



Bentgrass/Poa rough and fairway. Where's the border line?

Bent/Poa Roughs ... Another Look

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MANY GOLF courses have changed the layout of their fairways through the use of contour mowing patterns in recent years, intending to add new interest to older designs, recapture some of the challenge lost to improvements in golfing equipment, and to allow more intensive fairway maintenance through the reduction in total fairway acreage. Generally speaking, when contours are exaggerated around ponds, bunkers and tree groups, the widths of most fairways have been reduced, and large areas of what had been fairway turned into rough. Most of the goals have been accomplished, but in many cases the program has caused new problems — rough areas consisting of *Poa annua* and bentgrass.

For several reasons, *Poa annua* and bentgrass are definitely undesirable as rough grasses. With rough areas maintained at a height of two inches, these species are unable to attain this height without developing excessive thatch and/or segregating into unsightly



The old rough has been stripped and made ready for Kentucky bluegrass sod.

clumps. In conjunction with the tendency to develop thatch at higher cutting heights, related problems of increased susceptibility to disease, insect and scalping problems also come into play. Since these grasses do not readily reach rough height and are of the same texture as the fairway turf, it is frequently very difficult for both golfers and maintenance personnel to recognize the difference between fairway and rough. After the architect has left, the golf course superintendent is often left with the problem of renovating roughs to save the entire contouring program. An outraged membership does not understand how the new rough areas have added to the beauty and playability of the golf course when they are so unsightly and difficult to play from.

In 1985, Park Country Club of Buffalo undertook a fairway contouring program as a first step toward the implementation of a long range master plan. Our long-range planning committee had worked for two years to develop the master plan for restoration of the golf course, which had originally been designed by C. H. Alison and H. S. Colt and had opened for play in 1928. In

conjunction with this work, we also planned the installation of an automatic irrigation system.

ONCE the master plan was final, a golf course architect was brought in to establish the new fairway contours and centerlines so the new irrigation system could be installed during the summer. Fairway contouring reduced the size of the fairways by approximately four acres, to 23 acres overall. The first hint that there might be problems with the new contours arose when we found it was necessary to repeatedly outline the contours with paint so that the men mowing the fairways could distinguish them from the rough. The bentgrass was not growing fast enough or tall enough to make a distinct difference between rough and fairway. Golfers were also becoming upset because they were unable to clearly identify fairway outlines as they teed off, often finding a shot they thought was perfectly aimed lying in one of the new contours, which had not been visible to them.

As the season moved into the stress period of the summer, clumps of grass began to develop in the rough. Many of

the new rough areas had previously been overseeded with a bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mixture, which had produced only a sporadic cover of ryegrass. The ryegrass was flourishing in the heat of the summer, while the bentgrass and *Poa annua* surrounding it was collapsing. Golfers often found their balls nestled behind these clumps of ryegrass, creating a very difficult golf shot. By the end of the summer, the membership was distraught about the condition of the rough, and the future of the new fairway contour mowing was in serious jeopardy.

Knowing that the rough was of major concern, the grounds committee began studying solutions to the problem. It was apparent that a quick and permanent solution was necessary or the entire contouring program would be rejected. Since the existing grasses in the contours had become very thatchy and had segregated badly, all existing grass had to be removed in order to provide a uniform surface and a starting point. There were two possible routes to follow: (a) remove all the existing sod, or (b) use a non-selective herbicide to kill all existing growth. The chemical herbicide method would have to be followed by

Recently sodded bluegrass rough along a contoured fairway.



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overseeding the entire area. In view of the limited success with overseeding in the past, the committee decided that the results were not only too slow, but they had not yielded an acceptable quality of turf cover to warrant continuing. The unsightly appearance during overseeding and the rather spotty cover of turf that follows for some time could actually aggravate an already sensitive situation. Having ruled out the possibility of overseeding, we were left with only one alternative — removal of the existing sod and replacement with new bluegrass sod.

TRYING TO obtain funding for this project and then implementing the program, which would involve the removal and installation of some four acres of sod, was a frightening prospect indeed. Realizing that it would not be possible to complete the entire course in one year, we chose to work first on those areas that would make the greatest visual impact and lend the greatest support to the program. Holes No. 1, 2, 10, and 18 were chosen as the first areas to be resodded, composing approximately 30 percent of the entire project. In discussing the procedure and timing for implementation, it was obvious that our own maintenance staff would not be able to complete the project when we wanted it done. They were busy finishing the cleanup following the installation of the new irrigation system. In addition to speed, it was clear that the project must be completed with a minimum of disruption to play. The installation of the irrigation system had already produced a disrupted golf schedule for the entire summer. With these restrictions in mind, a commercial landscape contractor was hired to do the sod removal, soil preparation and new sod installation. The club agreed to cut the sod along the designed fairway contours to insure proper location and to purchase the sod.

The actual procedure was very simple. Once the soil was exposed, hand tillers and tractors with soil pulverizers prepared the soil to a depth of approximately two inches. The surface was then hand raked and a starter grade fertilizer was applied. Sod was delivered in 5,000-square-foot shipments because of a weight limitation on an access bridge,

and all the sod was laid on the day of delivery to ensure quality. A thorough watering followed the installation, and ropes were put up to limit cart traffic.

It took approximately six working days to convert 47,000 square feet of bentgrass/*Poa annua* rough into 100 percent bluegrass. Surprisingly, however, that was not the only change. The attitude of the membership toward the contouring program was changing almost as rapidly as the new sod was being installed. Suddenly, comments could be heard about how striking the contours now looked, and how nice and uniform the rough areas were. It appeared that our plan for a rapid and striking change in these rough areas had worked far better than anticipated. The contrast provided by the bluegrass made the contours extremely visible and allowed the artistic beauty the architect had planned to show through. Since the completion of this first phase, further funding has been approved and plans call for the entire project to be completed in about three years.

SEVERAL valuable thoughts developed from the experiences of the fairway contouring program at Park Country Club. First, if you embark on a program of fairway contouring, be prepared to do some extensive renovation work on the new rough areas. In addition, the goals of the program should be explained to the members, and they should be told what to expect. Sodding fairway contours is a viable alternative to renovating and overseeding. Certainly the initial cost for sodding is greater, but the cost and time involved in establishing a dense, mature stand of turf by means of overseeding can also be significant both in terms of the cost and in dealing with a group of unhappy golfers.

While most golf courses would not have the resources to resod every square foot of bent/*Poa* rough turf, you might consider this technique in crucial play areas, or where it is especially difficult to establish turf from seed because of heavy traffic. If the opportunity presents itself, try resodding a small area and see how impressive it can be. I think you and your members will be pleased with the results. Resodding is certainly an alternative to overseeding bentgrass/*Poa annua* roughs on golf courses today.