

You Don't Always Have to Raise the Bar!

When unrealistic expectations and environmental alternatives meet at a crossroads, choose the environmental approach.

by LARRY GILHULY

IN MARCH 1982 the USGA Turfgrass Research Committee was formed to guide the USGA's long-range multi-million-dollar turfgrass research plans for the coming decade. The purpose is to develop Minimal Maintenance Turfgrasses for Golf with particular emphasis on a 50% reduction in water use requirements and 50% lower maintenance costs overall" — 1985 USGA Annual Turfgrass Research Report.

"It is the intent of the United States Golf Association (USGA) Executive Committee, through the USGA Foundation, to collect and disseminate substantial amounts of money for support of research to: 1) "produce improved turfgrasses which substantially reduce water use, pesticide use, and maintenance costs . . ." — 1995 USGA Turfgrass and Environmental Research Summary.

"Furthermore, the cost of working with their aggressive growth habits (new bents and hybrid bermudagrasses) and inherent problems, such as excessive thatch buildup, can be substantial in terms of increased maintenance labor and equipment" — May 1999 *Golf Course Management* magazine, page 22.

Wait a minute! The turf industry has been funding meaningful research for nearly two decades to reduce overall costs and impacts on the environment, and what we get are vastly superior putting surfaces that cost substantially more! Is there something wrong with this picture? You bet there is, and it is called a lack of understanding and expectation levels that are out of control. Let's look at one example.

Several decades ago, seashore paspalum was introduced into Hawaii due to its ability to withstand poor water quality. The grass was spread from site to site over a 20- to 25-year period and became a highly adapted grass for oceanfront hotel complexes

due to the combination of excellent color, the ability to withstand salts, less water inputs, a natural capacity to compete with weeds and a significantly reduced requirement for fertilizer, specifically nitrogen! Let's see — a grass that uses poor quality water or seawater, requires 1/3 to 1/2 the amount of nitrogen, naturally competes with weeds where seawater is used as a herbicide, apparently has no major disease or insect concerns and maintains a consistent green color. Doesn't this sound exactly like the original goals of the USGA Research and Environmental Program? Wouldn't you think that golfers and golf course superintendents would be all over this grass as the answer for the greens, tees, fairways, and roughs in areas where it is adapted, to counter the environmental claims being made against golf courses in Hawaii? The answer should be an obvious yes; however, the reality has been less than enthusiastic, with some notable exceptions.

Why would a grass that obviously can address all of the worthwhile goals stated earlier not become the dominant and most desired grass? In Hawaii, it is called the Mauna Lani experience. On the mainland, you can relate to it as the *Poa annua* experience. When seashore paspalum is introduced into hybrid bermudagrass putting surfaces, the grass grows at a different rate than the bermudagrass because it is being overfertilized. The resulting playing surface is extremely bumpy, inconsistent, and definitely not fun to play. This occurred at Mauna Lani through the late '80s to mid-'90s, just as *Poa annua* invasion occurs on so many creeping bentgrass golf courses. Those who played Mauna Lani during this time came away with nothing but negative thoughts, including yours truly. However, once the greens became 100% seashore paspalum, the visiting players have had no complaints concerning the greens.

Fast forward to 1999. A new golf course on Oahu (Coral Creek) has opened with 100% seashore paspalum. All of the positive attributes of greatly reduced fertilizer use (1/4 lb. N/1,000 sq. ft. every 6-8 weeks on tees and fairways!), irrigation with brackish water, no disease or insect concerns, and no need for herbicides have been observed at this course. In addition, the greens are maintained at 1/8" at a normal speed of 9 feet. Reports from regular players are extremely positive, yet there are still those who nearly go into convulsions at the mere mention of seashore paspalum. After all of the extremely positive attributes of this grass and the new greens-type seashore paspalum developed by Dr. Ron Duncan, of the University of Georgia, how in the world can anyone be against this grass? The unfortunate answer is that the majority in the golf industry are still far more interested in creating fast greens with excessive amounts of money than truly addressing environmental concerns. How else can one look at the preceding example and not come to this conclusion?

Granted, the introduction of new bents and bermudas has "raised the bar" for golf courses with high-end budgets. Don't begrudge these facilities for making nearly perfect playing conditions. However, do resist this "raising the bar" mentality when perfectly acceptable and environmentally appropriate alternatives come your way that can save you money. In these cases, take the bar and hide it!

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