

A Leopard Can't Change Its Spots

Are all the time and money spent interseeding new cultivars of grass into old turf just feeding the birds?

BY ROBERT VAVREK

It never makes sense to waste time or money, even more so during a slow economy when maintenance budgets are being slashed to help keep golf facilities' heads above water. Yet, many courses still cling to the hope that, by simply seeding a new species or an improved cultivar of grass into an existing stand of old turf, it will somehow result in a miraculous conversion of turf type.

Despite sound research to the contrary, the myth is kept alive by testimonials regarding a routine interseeding program undertaken by a well-known superintendent at a well-known course that, for example, transformed an old bent/*Poa* green into a spanking-new green cultivar. Buy a large quantity of expensive seed and work that seed into the existing turf over and over and over again until super grass pushes wimpy grass out of the greens. Another expensive program of dubious value is to pound a couple of tons of Kentucky bluegrass seed into 30 acres of healthy annual bluegrass fairways for a couple of seasons, with the great expectation of changing *annua* to *pratensis*.

Of course, aggressive seeding into thin or bare areas of turf after winter injury or summer stress can be successful. Similarly, seeding into sites that have been fumigated or killed with glyphosate are excellent candidates for conversion. Keys to success are good seed-to-soil contact, timely irrigation, adequate sunlight, no carts or foot traffic, and minimal mowing stress.

Sowing tiny bentgrass or bluegrass seeds into a dense stand of existing turf is another story altogether. We have all seen this scenario play out many times on a thin putting green. Bentgrass seed is diligently incorporated into cultivation holes, spiked into the turf, or top-dressed into verticut grooves. Ten days later, seedlings are clearly evident and the masses of green fuzz provide considerable satisfaction for a job well done. Ten days later the seedlings are gone without a trace, and we seed again. This usually goes on and on until the existing bentgrass finally creeps into the thin areas from the perimeter or until *Poa annua* germinates and fills in the bare spots from seed already present in the soil.

Competition constrains conversion. Successful germination does not guarantee successful establishment. Excessively high seeding rates are often employed to hasten establishment, but this tactic only forces fragile seedlings to compete with each other, as well as compete with the adjacent mature plants. No surprise that the mature plants with healthy root systems get the lion's share of water, light, and nutrients. It might take only one stressful afternoon without supplemental irrigation during dry, windy weather to lose an entire crop of seedlings.

No doubt there will be an occasion when the earth, sun, moon, and planets are properly aligned, and a half-hearted attempt at simple interseeding produces fairly good results. Maybe the weather fully cooperates

with timely showers, sunlight, and temperatures that favor the bentgrass and inhibit the *Poa*. Perhaps these are the rare exceptions that preserve the myth of turf conversion. Then again, who can determine whether a single bentgrass plant is actually A-4 or a plant from a fine-textured patch of segregated Penncross? How do you document the return from your seed investment when you cannot tell one bentgrass plant from another without considerable DNA analysis?

Successful conversion to improved cultivars of turf is achievable, but rarely is it as easy as some might lead you to believe. The competition from existing turf must be addressed. The more you address the competition, the better the chances for conversion. However, suppressing or eliminating competition will likely have an adverse effect on playing conditions, but no pain, no gain. Don't fool yourself into thinking an old stand of turf can be painlessly converted into new turf with little other than a program of frequent interseeding. You might think my opinion is for the birds; then again, it's probably the birds that benefit the most from the futile attempts to incorporate expensive seed into healthy turf.

BOB VAVREK discusses turf conversion and other options for improving golf course playing conditions in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.