

**ALL THINGS CONSIDERED –  
a USGA staff opinion**

## Grass Choice Changes the Game

*Southern golf courses are making advancements to produce firmer putting greens that improve the game.*

By Patrick M. O'Brien

A knock on southern golf courses that have bentgrass putting greens has been that in the summer months the greens lack firmness. They contend that a key challenge of the game is taken away. In many ways, the critics have been accurate. When players are provided with softer putting greens, they can drop a ball out of the sky directly to the hole location without fear. Softer golf courses can compromise strategic design, but firmer

conditions can bring back the architectural line of attack. Well, the game is changing in the Southeast, and the solution is not only much less expensive than adding back tees to make courses longer, but it draws out the element of firmness, which architects have preached for years as an essential challenge in the game. The ultradwarf bermudagrasses (Champion, MiniVerde, TifEagle) are the answer.

### HOW FIRMNESS HAPPENS

Why are ultradwarf bermudagrasses in the Southeast firmer in July and August compared to bentgrass putting greens? Have you ever wondered why bentgrass putting greens in the Southeast generally play much firmer in May than in August? The answers require a look below the surface of both a bentgrass and an ultradwarf bermudagrass putting green.

Creeping bentgrass is a cool season species that is not well adapted to high temperatures. When soil temperatures begin to climb into the



Just the way you want it. An ultradwarf bermudagrass green is the answer.



upper 70's to 80's, the root system starts to die back. Depending on the location, there are, on average, 10 to 12 weeks of weather that is very unfavorable to creeping bentgrass growth. As the root system dies back, what was formerly live, functioning plant tissue is now dead, and that fresh organic matter swells with water, plugs capillary channels, and becomes soft. When temperatures cool in the fall, the grass begins to recover and the turf manager works to get the greens ready to handle the next bout of heat the following summer. And the cycle continues.

Ultradwarf bermudagrasses are warm season species that thrive, not die, in the heat. A soil profile shows an extensive network of above-ground growing points called stolons. These stolons are intermingled with surface topdressing applications that provide excellent firmness throughout the year, not seasonally like bentgrass. While the bentgrass superintendent spends an inordinate amount of time on plant health issues for the summer months, the ultradwarf bermudagrass superintendent can focus on playability that affects firmness, speed, etc. Abrasive practices such as brushing, light vertical mowing, and heavier topdressings are standard operating procedures for ultradwarf putting greens, and they do promote firmer, faster surfaces. Attempting these practices on bentgrass putting greens in the summer months to the same degree are not recommended due to the fragile plant health of bentgrass in the summer.

## CHAMPIONSHIP COURSE BENEFITS

Although the first part of the article is theoretical, an examination of championship golf in the Southeast bears out these theories. The TPC Southwind in Memphis, Tennessee converted from bentgrass to Champion ultradwarf bermudagrass, and the change in average score for the field in their PGA Tour event increased about one to two shots higher per round. The course is now in the top five most difficult, based on field scoring average on the PGA Tour. Other courses that host championship-level golf in the summer that have made the switch from bentgrass to an ultradwarf include Annandale in Jackson, MS

and East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, GA. They both have seen higher scoring and firmer putting greens.

In 2011, the first major championship will be played on an ultradwarf bermudagrass next summer when the PGA Championship is contested at the Atlanta Athletic Club. In 2009, the club removed their bentgrass and replaced it with Champion bermudagrass. It will be interesting to compare how the course played in 2001 when David Toms took home the title on bentgrass putting greens to a firmer, faster course in 2011.

Firmness is the new frontier in the game of golf, and today there are grass choices for southern golf courses that provide the golf course superintendent with more firmness and green speed control than ever before. If you want a firmer southern golf course, an ultradwarf bermudagrass is an important part of this strategy.

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