Greens covers help Bermuda spring back

By MIKE BAILEY

Houston

By keeping an eye on the weather forecast and using coverings on cold nights, two Houston area golf course superintendents preserved the Bermudagrass on their greens in play during winter. The practice was found to yield better wintertime putting surfaces while avoiding the typical transition problems during spring, the superintendents said.

Kevin Carpenter, director of agronomy at Redstone Golf Club in Humble, covered greens six times last winter, limiting their exposure to hard freezes. The goal was to bring the greens back quicker in the spring, avoid transition and have the TifEagle greens in good shape by the time the Shell Houston Open was played in late April.

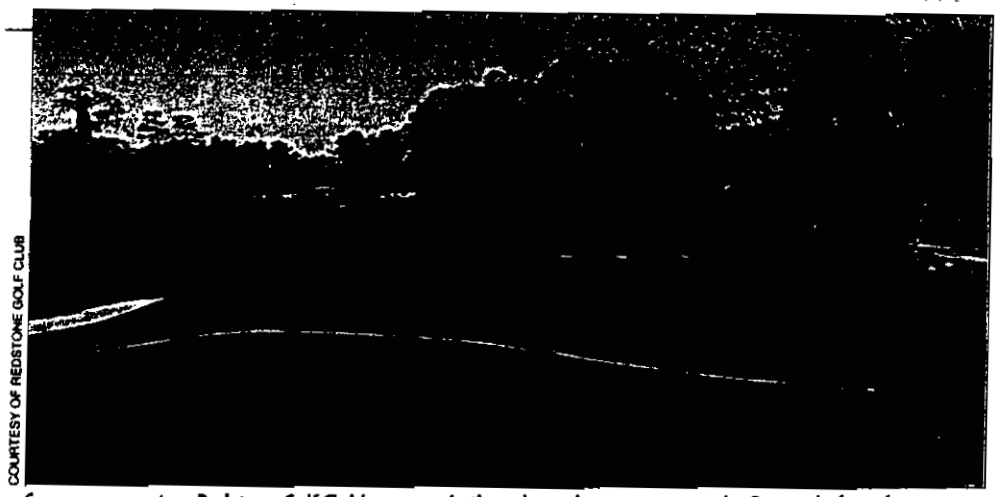
"They didn't go totally off color, but they did go dormant," said Carpenter. For Carpenter, the process was successful, and he plans to cover them again this year.

The Club at Carlton Woods in The Woodlands, which also has TifEagle greens, uses lightweight covers over the winter to prevent greens from going dormant. Superintendent Eric Bauer started the practice two years ago, figuring as mild as winter tends to be in the Houston area, the potential for failure wasn't great.

Bauer first explored the possibility with his assistant, Clint Neely, a graduate of the turfgrass program at Mississippi State University. Neely has kept in contact with one of his former professors, Mike Goatley, Ph.D., associate professor and agronomist in the department of plant and soil sciences.

Goatley has conducted trials on athletic turf since 1998 as he sought to extend the playing season on Tifway Bermudagrass sports fields in the Starkville, Miss., area. By covering the turf, he found that dormancy could be pushed back into the first part of December. Since football season was over by then for most schools, the need to overseed in that climate was eliminated.

Goatley also conducted studies at the university golf course with Pat Sneed, CGCS, to see if the same practice would lead to later dormancy and sooner green-up in the spring. He found that covering minimized frost damage and that greens regained their color four to six weeks earlier than if they had not been covered.



COURTESY OF REDSTONE GOLF CLUB

Covers were put on Redstone Golf Club's greens six times last winter to protect the Bermuda from freezes.

Goatley advised Carlton Woods that covering whenever the temperature was projected to be 40 degrees Fahrenheit or lower might stave off dormancy altogether.

"There are no guarantees that it will stay green throughout the winter, but this could be an ideal system for those courses along the Gulf Coast," Goatley said.

Besides keeping greens warmer, using a black cover, in particular, will prevent chlorophyll from breaking down as quickly, helping greens maintain their color throughout most, if not all, of winter. Drawbacks could be weeds or disease from the unexpected warmth, but the plants suffer no damage while covered, he said.

Covering, of course, isn't viable for many courses. Aesthetically, it's hard to beat an overseeded golf course during winter. Resorts in Florida, Texas and Arizona, for example, typically look their best during winter – greens included.

Mike Hills, research agronomist for Seed Research of Oregon, pointed out some drawbacks to covering Bermuda greens. For example, a particularly harsh winter, which can occur every four or five years along the Gulf Coast, can foil the best laid plans and render covered greens dormant anyway. Also, because of the slow growth of Bermuda greens in the winter, those that aren't overseeded can't withstand much traffic.

As for transition concerns, Hills said there are improved grass species available for overseeding Bermuda greens.

"Velvet Bentgrass is probably the biggest standout in this category for use on golf greens," said Hills.

"It comes in fast in the fall, has great wear and low-light tolerance through winter, and goes away relatively easily in spring for transition back to the Bermuda base."

Last winter, Carlton Woods covered greens between 30 and 40 times, and the grass never went dormant. Bauer spent about $30,000 for 202,000 square feet of a new, lightweight cover from Florence, Ala.-based Xton. The polypropylene woven covers come in black and white, with the latter more suited to courses using covers to prevent frost damage and promote earlier green-up.

Bauer said a crew of six can cover 18 greens in a couple of hours and that the covers pay for themselves in a couple of seasons. He estimates saving between $15,000 and $20,000 per year on labor, seed, fertilizer and herbicide normally used for transition.

Pat O'Brien, director of the U.S. Golf Association Green Section's Southeast region cautioned superintendents who cover greens to guard against green speeds getting too high.

"Cold weather is a growth regulator much the same way Primo is," said O'Brien, recommending that mowing heights be raised slightly in the winter to maintain manageable green speeds. "Agronomically, this has a lot of pluses. I think this could be big."

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