

Turfgrass | Sam Ballard

Transition transformation

Considering the large, and growing, proportion of the US population that lives south of the Mason-Dixon line, the number of Major championships that have been played in the South is remarkably low (well, apart from the annual April gathering in Augusta, of course). Partly this relates to the history of golf; the game's early growth in the USA came in the Northeast and Midwest and those regions, along with California, contain a substantial percentage of the country's classic courses, on which Majors have mostly been contested.

But there's more to this divide than just history. The US Open and PGA Championship are played in the summer, at a time of year when the Southern heat makes both golfers and many course superintendents uncomfortable. The former we may not worry about, but Major championships deserve the best course conditions we can provide.

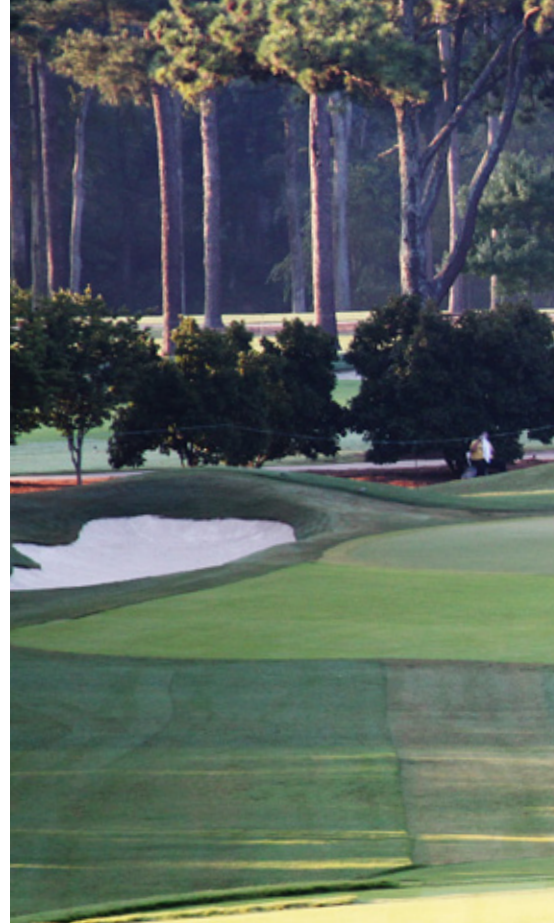
Anyone who has played much golf in the transition zones of the mid-South will be familiar with the problem. The creeping bentgrasses that many in golf believe make for the smoothest, quickest putting greens struggle in the summer heat, demanding extreme measures such as hand watering several times a day and enormous fans behind greens to cool the grass. And the warm season grasses, principally bermuda and zoysia derivatives, that thrive in those summer conditions, have generally, until recently, been

regarded as less desirable.

In recent years, the massive investment by breeders in warm season turfgrasses has seen many courses in transition zones move over to ultradwarf species, mostly with positive results. But the most dramatic validation of this approach came in August, when the PGA Championship was contested on Atlanta Athletic Club's Highlands course. AAC, under its long-serving director of golf courses and grounds Ken Mangum, had converted the Highlands course entirely to warm season turfgrasses two years earlier, with Champion ultradwarf bermuda on the previously bentgrass greens, Diamond zoysia on the fairways and Tifton bermuda in the roughs.

Mangum says it was hard evidence of increasing summer heat that finally convinced him to regrass. "We have a weather station on our property, and we know our summers are getting hotter," he says. "In 2001, from July 15-August 15, we had only nine hours over 90 degrees. During the same period of 2010, we had more than 600 hours. Bentgrass grows best between 60-75 degrees. But there was no time in that period that we had those temperatures!"

The Highlands course went through an extensive renovation led by ASGCA Past President Rees Jones and his associate, Bryce Swanson ASGCA, in 2006, to prepare for the 2011 PGA. At that point, Mangum says, he still favored bentgrass greens,



though he knew the decision was finely balanced. What pushed him over was the issues that nearby East Lake Golf Club had with its bentgrass greens in 2007 (East Lake has also since regrassed with warm season turf, with widely acclaimed results). "August 2007 was really hot, and that year the Tour Championship moved from November to September," he says. "The greens were not as East Lake would have wanted for the championship, and we realized that we needed to take another look at our plans for August 2011."

Important though the PGA was to AAC, it was only one week in the life of a course that is played by its members twelve months of the year, and the decision to switch turf had to work in the round. Course managers in transition zones know that, whichever way they go they will have issues, either with the cool season grasses in summer, or with

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Atlanta Athletic Club was widely acclaimed for its conditioning at the 2011 PGA Championship

the warm season ones in winter, and Mangum says the real key is knowing when most golf is played. “The first thing to start with is your rounds of golf,” he says. “We graph them, so we know when our members play. When is it important that your golf course peaks? We play 75 per cent of our golf from April-October. In three of those months, our greens were substandard. One of the worst things you can have on bentgrass in the heat is traffic, so by sticking with cool season greens, we were doubling our difficulties.”

At the head of the article, we mentioned the great exception to the lack of Majors in the South, Augusta National. But, as Mangum points out, Augusta’s example is not one most courses in the region should follow, simply because of the unique nature of that club. “At Augusta, they have bentgrass greens and they play on overseeded ryegrass fairways,” Mangum says. “And then they close for the summer, before the overseed dies and the bentgrass starts to struggle. They don’t have to keep the greens playable in the heat of summer, just alive.”

Atlanta can get very cold weather during the winter, although AAC remains open, extreme conditions apart, year-round (the Highlands averages around 2,000 rounds during January and a little more than that in December). But Mangum says protecting his new warm season greens from the cold is easier than trying to keep bentgrass in good condition through the summer. “We asked ourselves: if we’re going to have some catastrophic weather, what system handles that the best?” he says. “Which can we fight? We have heat and cold; we can battle the cold by putting twelve inches of pine straw and a cover on it if we need to. But we can’t fight the heat, because people are still playing golf.”

Mangum says he’s certain that AAC would have switched eventually, even without the impetus of the PGA. “The model matches our play better,” he says. “Now, we’re looking at changing the Riverside course too. On the Highlands, we’re saving around \$50,000-\$60,000 a year with the ultradwarf, because we don’t use as many fungicides, we don’t have the

fans running and we don’t have guys out with hoses. In the Atlanta area, more and more courses are moving to warm season, though I think lots of people were waiting to see how we did! The trend started with daily fee courses, who realized they could make more money with a warm season grass. The prejudice against warm season is still out there: that’s why we also try to say ‘ultradwarf’ rather than bermuda, people still have a set attitude about bermuda. I still love bentgrass. But it’s not as good a model for our environment.”

The final word goes to *Golf Digest* architecture editor Ron Whitten. “What will be remembered a decade from now, even 50 years from now, is that this was the event and the course that disproved the conventional wisdom that major-championship golf in the Deep South is risky,” Whitten says. “As far as I’m concerned, Atlanta Athletic Club has set a new standard for major championship conditioning. It didn’t just raise the bar. It is the bar. That’s what the new rating system will become. I can hear it now: ‘Sure, your course is in great shape. But it’s no AAC.’” ●