



Bears Club superintendent John Katterheinrich inspects a field of Celebration growing near Bradenton, Florida, US.

## Aussie Celebration for Florida golf course

**A**S YOU have read in previous articles, we have been in dire need of improved bermuda grass to replace the old stand-by's of Tifway 419 and Tifdwarf bermuda.

The University of Georgia and the United States Department of Agriculture Research Experiment Station in Tifton, Georgia, thought they had the next generation of turf-type bermuda grass covered with TifSport and TifEagle, two varieties developed by Dr Wayne Hanna with improved texture, resistance to pests, and tolerance to closer mowing heights.

Unfortunately, TifSport didn't do well at higher heights and TifEagle did even more poorly at the lower cut settings necessary to meet the current demand for green speed.

Thankfully, Mini-Verde came along just in time to take care of the greens, but we still needed something more versatile to replace the 419. That is until now.

The search for a better fairway and rough bermuda has been hampered by the almost superior grass it needs to replace; Tifway 419. Developed as a triploid or sterile bermuda and released in 1960, it has been the hands-down standard for golf course use in

### Plugged Lies from America

By **JON SCOTT**  
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warm season environments ever since.

About 20 years ago the golf courses then recently planted with 419 were observed to be highly contaminated with off-types, and an effort ensued to begin a cleanup of the foundation stock.

In the meantime work was progressing on TifSport and it was hoped that its superior cold tolerance and pest resistance would replace 419 and maintain the dominance of the Georgia bermuda breeding program.

TifSport has done very well in the sportsfield market but has enjoyed limited success in the golf industry due to its relatively poor rough height performance.

This caused golf turf managers and architects to return to the old stand-by, Tifway 419, while patiently waiting for something better to come along.

This dilemma recently became personal for me and Bears Club superintendent, John Katterheinrich.

The Bears Club is located in Jupiter, Florida, and a stone's throw away from Nicklaus Design headquarters in North Palm Beach.

It also happens to be the southern home course and personal design of one, Jack W Nicklaus. The superintendent, John K, as he is known to the members, has been struggling with contaminated 419 on the golf course since taking over the reigns about seven years ago. The "off-types" were sticking out most visibly during the winter high playing season for South Florida golf courses. For a golf course that is expected to be pristine every day of the week, that was just unacceptable.

The remedy was regrassing and a proposal was put together to do just that as soon as the members headed north in May for the cooler summer golf season.

At the time we started working on the proposal there really wasn't any consideration for using a different grass on the fairways and roughs.

For the greens we had already tested Mini Verde on a practice green and as expected Jack liked it. Mini Verde

had already been used on both the renovated North Palm Beach Country Club and more recently, Bear Lakes Links in West Palm Beach, both receiving rave reviews from players and maintenance crews alike.

John has been caring for TifEagle which has done well under his bentgrass and Poa style management program, but he admits it is a fickle grass that demands constant attention to perform at the highest level.

Without a doubt when it is good it is very good, and that makes the comparison a close one and the choice difficult.

We gave the edge to Mini Verde based on its deeper rooting characteristics, less tendency to produce excess organic mat, and a perceived slight edge on salt tolerance.

Lest I get in trouble with my TifEagle friends, let me say that I'd take TifEagle any day over Tifdwarf and it can certainly hold its own against Champion. I just happen to believe that Mini Verde has a slightly higher margin of safety when it comes to natural and man-made anomalies.

John and I, along with Nicklaus Design Director of Field Operations, Doug Morey, began to put the scope of the re-grassing together for contract bidding. We researched qualified contractors and grass suppliers and shortened our list to the best of the best.

In the process we had already identified the most trusted local supplier of 419 bermuda, Pike Creek Turf near Adel, Georgia, and we were proceeding on the basis that they would be the preferred source.

Things were progressing smoothly until I had an unscheduled meeting with Jack in the office the day after New Year's. He was of course aware of our work on the re-grassing proposal, and he almost casually asked if we had considered any grass besides Tifway 419.

To say I was caught flat would be an understatement. I stammered something about having few alternatives, but I've learned that argument doesn't go very far with a guy who has created options most of his life.

Naturally, seashore paspalum came up, but I knew that wouldn't be a pref-



Visits to two recently regrassed golf courses with Celebration showed that in both instances the turf was green, growing, and looking great in January and February – the two worst months for bermuda growth in South Florida.

erence for the Bears Club given the fact that we have good irrigation water.

Paspalum is a great grass, as I've stated in previous articles and it has opened golf to areas that would otherwise never see the game played under good conditions.

But there are differences in the way the ball and the club react when they contact paspalum that the golfer must adjust to.

These differences are acceptable when the alternative is dirt, but most of the better players prefer bermuda to paspalum all things being equal. With paspalum out of the picture, my mind raced to come up with an alternate bermuda and the answer was Celebration.

We had previously used Celebration at the owner's request at Old Corkscrew in Estero, Florida, near Naples, and Jack liked the look and texture when he played the opening round.

I knew of the grass from my PGA Tour days having seen it at Harbour Town Golf Links on Hilton Head in the shaded roughs. Gary Snyder, the golf course superintendent, had used it in areas where 419 had traditionally thinned out under the shade of the large, South Carolina oaks, and it looked fantastic.

I remember thinking then that this grass would have great potential as a "niche" grass and wondered how it would do in a more open environment.

I had pretty much lost track of the variety since then until seeing it at Old Corkscrew where I was stricken with its deep green color and adaptation to varied mowing heights. Frankly, I hadn't thought of it as a primary choice for

the Bears Club until Jack nodded in approval at the suggestion.

I broke the news to John the next day. He was as intrigued as I was as both of us really knew very little about the grass. However, the one thing that became apparent to both of us was that replacing 419 with 419 was not going to give the members enough bang for their buck, and they would likely be disappointed in the outcome.

As we both looked at the fairways we knew that Jack had given us the nudge that we needed to open our minds to an alternative. That very day, we set up visits to two nearby golf courses that had grassed to Celebration in the last two years.

To be honest, I had no idea of where Celebration came from until I researched it on the internet. Much to my surprise, your own Rod Riley popped up immediately as the "father" of Celebration. Called Riley's Super Sport in Australia, it was eventually licensed to Toby Wagner of Sod Solutions in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, for distribution and sales outside Australia.

I had heard of Super Sport for years, having read articles and advertisements in *TurfCraft International*, but never made the connection to Celebration.

The irony was not lost on me as I have been advocating more international exchange of research and products since I started writing for *TurfCraft*, and with Australia in particular. Here was a grass that originated as a hybrid Australian couch being introduced to the US. The revolution has begun.

The two golf courses we visited had superior golf course turf conditions for non-overseeded bermuda during the winter months. In both instances the turf was green, growing, and looking great in January and February, our two worst months for bermuda growth in South Florida.

We had both seen courses grassed with GNI, Greg Norman's brand, and been disappointed. Celebration appeared to have all of the positive qualities of GNI and none of the negatives. Clearly we now knew what Jack

was thinking. The next step was to visit the local growers.

We first visited the grower that had supplied Celebration to both of the clubs John and I visited.

It was obvious that his fields were in the regeneration stage and we were amazed by the aggressiveness of the grass in what would normally be a semi dormant phase for bermuda growth.

The grower said it would be no problem to have his fields ready for us by June and based on the growth activity we were seeing in the middle of February, we knew he wasn't making false promises.

We also visited another grower across the state and saw similar attributes. Since we were close to Old Corkscrew we paid an impromptu visit with superintendent, Kevin Leo, to get his take on the grass a year and a half after planting.

Kevin told us that Old Corkscrew had been a solid success since opening last year and was running close to 125 rounds per day this winter. The first place I headed was the practice range



A Florida nursery growing Celebration where the fields were in the regeneration stage but showed amazing aggressiveness of the grass in what would normally be a semi dormant phase for bermuda growth.

tee and I was gratified to see that the divot healing was keeping pace with the traffic.

We then went out on to the golf course and noted that there was virtually no golf cart wear apparent on any of the entrance and egress points.

I had been told that this turf had tremendous wear potential, but seeing was believing.

The other striking revelation was that Kevin's fertiliser program was

based on less than 300 kilograms per hectare of nitrogen. Now I know why it was called Super Sport.

At present we are working directly with Joel Page to secure the best Celebration possible for the Bears Club fairways and roughs. There is no doubt in my mind that this will lead to further market expansion for Rod's grass in the domestic and international marketplace.

I am proud to tell people that this is an Australian discovery. There is much to be gained by looking beyond our borders for better turfgrass. The US has been at the forefront of turf research and turf breeding, and will undoubtedly remain so in the coming years. That doesn't mean that a grass has to come from here to be good.

Congratulations are in order to Rod for his efforts to develop and market improved varieties of bermuda in spite of the odds. I'm sure it won't be the last time we look beyond our borders to find solutions to our problems. Cheers, Australia.

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