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How to Select Turfgrass for Your Sports Field

BY STACIE ZINN ROBERTS

Amere 28 days before hosting the LaCrosse World Series Championship at Maryland SoccerPlex this past summer, Jerad Minnick, the nonprofit organization's director of grounds and environmental management, planted fresh grass sprigs on one of the facility's 22 sports fields. (Sprigs are broken up pieces of sod that are spread across a field and grown together to create a tight-knit stand of grass.) Sprigging a field so close to a major event is risky, but Minnick, who oversees the 160-acre park in Boyds, Md., knew he'd done his homework when selecting the turfgrass variety for the event. He was confident the playing field would be ready.

It helps that Minnick is an experienced sports turf professional. He also heads an organization called the Natural Grass Advisory Group that consults on natural grass issues for sports teams and facilities worldwide. Minnick knew the grass variety he planted, called Tahoma 31, an aggressive bermudagrass that grows in quickly and tolerates lots of wear, would grow in on time and be up to the scrutiny of the sport's best players, fans in the stands, and the thousands of viewers watching on ESPN.

What if the sports fields at your facil-

ity are in need of a turfgrass refurbishment, and you're not a turfgrass expert like Minnick? How do you select the best grass for your facility if you don't know the difference between bermudagrass, fescue or bluegrass?

Know Your Climate

The first step in selecting the right turfgrass for your facility is to consider your climate and location. Picture a map of the United States. If you draw a line horizontally from about South Carolina to Arizona, then another from Florida to Texas, you're likely in the region that uses warm-season grasses. For sports fields, this generally means you'll be planting a bermudagrass variety. Tifway 419, the bermudagrass standard for the past 50 years, has mostly been replaced for sports turf use by newer, more durable varieties such as Latitude 36 and Northbridge, or the aforementioned Tahoma 31, which also has exceptional cold tolerance and greens up earlier in the spring.

The one warm-season exception would be for facilities in highly salty environments (think coastal regions affected by salt spray, or beachfront parks where seawater flooding is an issue). There, you might consider plant-



ing a salt-tolerant variety of seashore paspalum like SeaStar or Platinum TE.

If your facility is in the northern third of the United States, from New England to the upper Midwest on out to Northern California, Washington and Oregon, you'll be more likely to plant cool-season varieties of fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. At least, this has been the rule of thumb until recently when extremely cold-hardy bermudagrasses like those developed at Oklahoma State University were released for use.

The horizontal swath of the country in the middle, from the Mid-Atlantic and mountains of the Carolinas through to the Midwest and dipping down into Southern California, is called the Transition Zone. This region of the country can use either warm-season or cool-season grasses. As temperatures climb higher due to climate change, many turfgrass pros are favoring warm-season grasses in the Transition Zone because they are more heat- and drought-resistant than cool-season grasses. One caveat is that warm-season grasses turn a golden/brownish color in the winter as they stop growing and go dormant in this region. Some Transition Zone turf managers who want green grass year-round in these areas may overseed with cool-season grasses in the fall or even use pigments to dye the grass green in the winter.

Wear, Water & Budget

"No doubt, traffic stress is the major challenge for managing a sports field.

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Therefore, a sports facility manager needs to select and use a great variety that is expected to tolerate frequent gaming-induced traffic stress,” said Dr. Yanqi Wu, professor of grass breeding and genetics at Oklahoma State University.

Minnick agrees that for sports fields, wear tolerance is paramount. Fields that get a lot of play can wear out quickly if the grass is not durable. In many parts of the country where irrigation water is expensive, selecting a grass that uses water efficiently is also a consideration.

“Many sports field budgets don’t provide sufficient funds for the purchase of fungicides and/or city water for irrigation. So getting a disease-free, drought-tolerant and cold-tolerant variety can help alleviate budgetary issues,” said Chad Adcock, vice president of business development at Riverside Turf, a sod farm in Charles City, Va., that produces both warm-season and cool-season grasses.

Choose a Variety

Even within the families of grasses

(bermudagrass, fescue, etc.), there are differing characteristics between varieties,” Wu said. “Let’s use bermudagrass as an example. Some bermudagrass varieties handle traffic stress better than others.”

To choose the variety that’s right for your facility, Wu suggests doing your research. The National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) provides multiple-year testing data of popular turfgrass species. (See <https://maps.umn.edu/ntep>.) Charts compare varieties head-to-head on wear tolerance, water use, cold tolerance, spring green-up and other characteristics. “Researchers at universities have also published volumes of data in traffic experiments, providing good information,” Wu said. Most of this information is available online.

Minnick recommends you talk with other sports turf managers in your region to find out what grasses they are using on their sports fields with success. Minnick suggests researching what professional sports teams, especially soccer teams, in your area are using on their fields. Most likely,

those same grasses will work on your field and should not be cost-prohibitive. Teams like the Philadelphia Union and Louisville FC post photos of their stadium grass and practice fields, and discuss maintenance practices on their Twitter feed. Check out hashtags like #TurfTwitter to find more resources.

“Don’t buy into the sales pitch from all the different sales companies as much as the results on the ground from the best fields in your area,” Minnick said.

Adcock recommends visiting a local sod farm to see the grasses used in your region. Ask questions about wear, water use and disease resistance. “It really takes a lot of research and due diligence,” Adcock said. “It always helps to be able to test the variety in your climate and soil type for a short while before making a determination.” **RM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stacie Zinn Roberts writes about turfgrass management and specializes in turfgrass marketing through her firm, What’s Your Avocado? Marketing & Public Relations based in Mount Vernon, Wash.

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