

WHY COMPROMISE?

Henry Bechelet
Turfgrass Agronomist



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My Enemy's Enemy

A common misconception about the way in which we favour the finer grass is that you have to use stress as the driving force. Starve and drought the situation and the browntop bents and fine fescues will come. Lose playing quality along the way but with the promise of better things to come. It is certainly a commonly held perception. I'm not convinced. The Disturbance Theory offers a different approach to achieving the finer grasses and one that doesn't compromise on playing quality. The DT approach is about appreciating the nature of all the grasses, not just the weakness of the annual meadow-grass. It produces strong surfaces that can be managed for speed and trueness. Our business is the game of golf and there is nothing more important than playing quality. With an appreciation of the nature of the finer grasses you can favour them without compromise. Many people are already following this method without any problems. The Disturbance Theory aims to give you a better understanding of the nature of the grasses to allow you to manage for the finer species better. Try "Changing the Nature of Your Greens" at stri.co.uk as an introduction. The article tells how each grass species has adapted to take advantage of different situations. Their growth strategies give rise to strengths and weaknesses. The insight is that it is wrong to assume that what is bad for annual meadow-grass is good for the finer grasses. To bring the finer grasses you need to know better than that. My enemy's enemy is not necessarily my friend.

Strength over weakness

Each species has their own strengths and weaknesses depending on how they evolved. To favour the finer grasses we need to appreciate their strengths. They will take over a settled environment. To see off the annual meadow-grass we can play on its weakness. It can be stressed out very easily. This means that we have to be cagey with our maintenance strategy. We need to play on the strengths of the finer grasses to allow them to develop. You can decide to move against the annual meadow grass given the right opportunity to see it off, but only without upsetting the overall balance. You shouldn't think that it is necessary to invoke stress all the time because it will hinder the development of the finer grasses. Stress is a short-term ploy to be used with care. You should focus primarily on minimising disturbance to let the finer grasses come. I'll show you what I mean.

Now That We're Here

The transition from starting point to fine turf heaven requires skilled handling. You will need to create a healthy but settled environment in the main and then bring some stress to bear when the time is right. The stress needs to be controlled for it to remove the meadow grass without adversely affecting the finer species. It is necessary for you to create your top quality putting surfaces in a way that doesn't constantly damage the functioning of the finer grasses. Browntop bents and Red fescues aren't made for rough treatment. You have to stay clear of harming the crown of the plant and so close mowing and regular aggressive verticutting should be avoided. You need to prepare your surfaces in a different way. Getting rid of the annual meadow grass is very much the easy bit at the end. You can't do this kind of "light touch" greenkeeping through prescriptive plans because the environment is different for everyone. You need to use your better understanding to be able to cope with the changing conditions and still keep the environment where the finer grasses will flourish. We are talking about the art of greenkeeping. We are talking about taking care of the finer grasses.

Make a start

Let's call your starting point a 100% annual meadow grass sward with 3 cm. of thatch at the turf base above a heavy soil. Start by stop doing what is was you were doing. Think pipe drainage, soil compaction relief, intensive coring and top dressing to get your soil conditions right. Re-appraise your nitrogen and water inputs. Start preparing your surfaces in a manner that doesn't require intensive verticutting and close mowing. The finer grasses flourish when not constantly damaged. Reduce your fertiliser inputs so that you don't have to get aggressive. Maintain healthy rather than lush growth. Top dress, brush and roll to maintain fast, smooth and true surfaces on which to play. Real putting surfaces. Overseed at every available opportunity and let the seedlings come through. You see the wisdom immediately. No compromise. As the finer grasses establish, continue to keep aggressive treatments to a minimum. In 3 to 4 years with the finer grasses assuming dominance think about putting some stress on the meadow-grass, but only when you aren't afraid to lose it. Let's call your finishing point bentgrass dominant and you will have appreciated its strengths and are very happy with them. The need to build-in fescues at this point will depend on the style and set-up of your course.

Mind the gap

Another starting point might be a new construction with a pure bent and fescue blend on a sand based rootzone, but how to keep it? First of all, beware of the gap, as it is the main strength of the annual meadow-grass. *Poa annua* sets seed to live and they are many and widespread. Maintain turf health to promote the development of a dense sward to close down the gaps. For goodness sake don't start starving the situation. Constantly overseed to fill the gaps with better and better varieties. Maybe consider the use of plant growth regulators (?). Keep damaging treatments to a minimum to retain a dense and healthy sward without too many gaps. Again, top dress, brush and roll for playing qualities because they don't inflict

damage. Leave the height of cut slightly higher on these greens to absorb the top dressing and to confer increased wear tolerance. You can achieve serious speed and trueness with bents and fescues at 4.5 – 5 mm. Educate the perpetrators of unrepaired pitch marks and clear up after them. Close down the gaps. Seriously consider protecting the surfaces from winter damage in the early years. Stipulate specific non-damaging soft spikes. Certainly, don't force-in any large gaps at the wrong time to allow the annual meadowgrass to take advantage. Sarel roll and micro solid tine during the summer to keep the surfaces open and receptive to effective watering. Big holes or scarification tracks should be well timed and quickly filled with top dressing and quality seed to take a better advantage of the situation. Invoke drought stress with care at opportune moments to get rid of the annual meadowgrass before it starts. Let's hope that you have got a rootzone that you can squeeze a bit occasionally. Let's call your finishing point your starting point and you appreciate its strengths.

Turn The World Around

To favour the finer grasses you need to appreciate their strengths and place your emphasis on them. They will overtake a settled environment with encouragement. Annual meadow-grass also has strengths and weaknesses that need to be understood and used given the chance. You certainly have to minimise the creation of gaps in new greens to prevent invasion. Stress can be used but it should be taken as an opportunity rather than a governing factor. Create an environment that the finer grasses love above all else and play on the weakness of the annual meadow-grass occasionally if you want to. If you create your high quality real putting surfaces without getting too aggressive and overseed at every opportunity then the bents and fescues will come. You don't have to compromise on playing quality; you just have to commit to it. Real putting surfaces with better playing qualities for longer in the year and with reduced vulnerabilities isn't really a choice. Think about it and then do it, but keep your head on. This is where the fun is.

My final DT article will be about aeration.

Henry Bechelet is the STRI Turfgrass Agronomist covering North and Eastern England.

Henry may be contacted by email at henry.bechelet@stri.co.uk or via <http://www.stri.co.uk/>