

Ready for the TURF'S

r e a c t i o n

Converting to paspalum will help The Resort at Longboat Key Club solve its salinity issues. Relying on a critical relationship will help director of agronomy John Reilly handle any disease issues the change produces.

By **Rick Woelfel**



John Reilly's official title at The Resort at Longboat Key Club in Sarasota, Fla., is director of agronomy. He might prefer something along the lines of partner with the environment. As much as he is committed to providing quality playing conditions for members and guests, he's also dedicated to environmental stewardship.

Reilly is a minimalist when it comes to applying products to his golf course. Like the physician who believes in prescribing the lowest effective dosage of a pharmaceutical to deal with a patient's illness, he takes the less-is-more approach to applying chemicals to his turf.

"We just try to create balance," he says, "and look at it from the aspect of air, water and then the inputs that we use, i.e. nutrients, fungicides or whatever the case may be."

Reilly notes the order in which those elements are listed is significant. "Are we giving the plants the right amount of sunshine and air?" he says. "Are we giving the plants the correct amount of water? And then, if we can't change those things in our favor, then we obviously use the inputs necessary to grow, or to get rid of the disease, the pest or whatever the case may be."

Reilly developed this philosophy at Rutgers University where he became enamored with the philosophies of Dr. William Albrecht, a renowned agronomist who had a long and distinguished career as a University of Missouri professor. Albrecht had an agricultural background but Reilly says the concepts he espoused are effective in the golf industry as well.

"I really became a believer in the approach to soil developed by William Albrecht," he says.

"If you work to create a certain balance in your soil and manage your air and water you can, in agriculture, increase yield. I know the way we manage turf on golf courses is a contrived, manipulated environment. I just try to maximize the natural checks and balances of Mother Nature before turning to manufactured inputs."

At 15, Reilly took his first job at a golf course at historic Rolling Green Golf Club outside Philadelphia and worked there through college. He embarked on a career in social work, but his decision to enroll at Rutgers signaled a career change. He left Rutgers in 1999 with a soil science degree.

Before arriving at Long Boat Key in 2009, he worked at a number of clubs in Florida, most notably the Innisbrook Resort, where he served as superintendent of the renowned Copperhead Course and oversaw a renovation. Over the course of his career, he has been responsible for four grow-ins and two renovations.

At Long Boat Key, Reilly is responsible for 45 holes spanning 205 acres along the beach adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico just west of downtown Sarasota. Construction on the original 18, christened the Islandside Course, began in the late 1950s; it opened for play in 1962. Today, the original course is known as Links on Longboat. The Harbourside Course, consisting of three nines, was completed in 1984. Both courses were originally designed by William Byrd, but Ron Garl was commissioned to do a redesign of all 45 holes. The renovation is scheduled to be completed in 2016. Both courses feature a soil composition that is a blend of calcareous sand and shell.

The property is situated on a barrier island that, before the resort was built, served as a dump for the city of Sarasota. Unfortunately for Reilly, the area around the resort averages only about 24 inches of rainfall per year. He notes there has been more rain this year. He had recorded 33.5 inches of rain for the year through October, but the mainland had received double that amount.

The salinity issue led Reilly to make the decision four years ago to regrass both golf courses and replace his Bermudagrass (primarily 419 and Ormond with Tifdwarf greens) with Platinum Paspalum, a strain of grass developed for golf courses and sports facilities in warm climates. Platinum Paspalum was introduced to the market in 2007 and is used on golf courses in such diverse locales as Florida, Mexico, the Bahamas, Spain, China, Vietnam, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. It is also in use at Minute Maid Park, the home of baseball's Houston Astros.

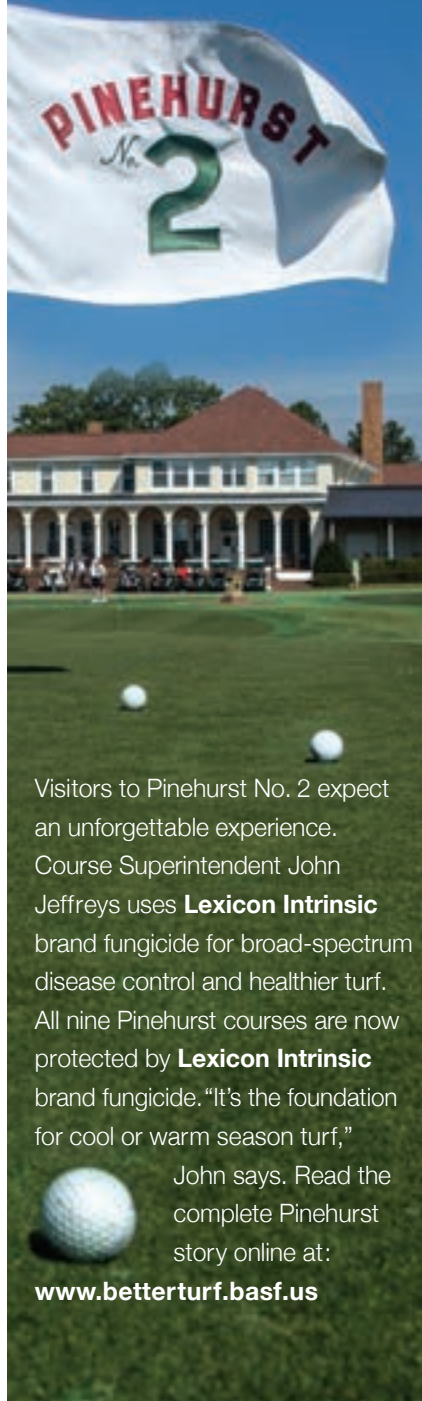
Most importantly, from Reilly's point of view, Platinum Paspalum is renowned for its extremely high salt tolerance. It will thrive in soil irrigated with water containing more than 5,500 ppm of salt, making it ideal for a golf facility situated near the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, it can be used "wall-to-wall" on greens, tees, fairways and in rough areas.

As of this writing, the transition wasn't quite complete. A total of 55 acres, encompassing the White Nine of the Harbourside Course, plus two ranges are still to be converted. All the greens have been completed, however.

Reilly notes utilizing a single variety of turfgrass through-

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SPONSORED CASE STUDY

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out the entire playing area of the golf course offers some distinct advantages. "It's a good thing, especially around the greens," he says. "You don't fight contamination. If you have a stressed area or an area that's getting traffic, you can change the mowing height. A lot of times that's all you need to do and you don't need to change anything else.

"If there's a back of a green where people come on and off, we can kind of move it in as a collar or the other way around. Or if there's an area that would make the game more fun, we can mow it out as green and have a false front that we didn't have before because we don't have to change grass types."

Once he made the decision to convert to Platinum Paspalum, he needed an effective fungicide.

"Preventative and curative fungicide use is a necessity with paspalum grass," he says. "Our real disease pressure started when we planted paspalum grass on the courses. Paspalum certainly handles the salt stress better (than Bermudagrasses), but has a higher propensity for disease."

When he arrived at Long Boat Key, Reilly found himself dealing with a fairy-ring issue due to the age and composition of Byrd's original greens. But with the installation of paspalum, he had to contend with leaf spot, patch diseases and dollar spot, and needed a solution.

Enter Chris Key, the senior sales specialist for BASF. Key and Reilly connected at a company seminar hosted by agronomist Fred Hemming, a territory sales manager for Residex. Key introduced Reilly to BASF's array of fungicides, including Honor Intrinsic, Lexicon Intrinsic and Xzemplar. Honor Intrinsic and Lexicon Intrinsic both contain Insignia (active ingredient: pyracloutrobin), which, data suggests, contributes to plant health.

"John became very familiar with BASF's plant-health story," Key says. "It kind of opened John's eyes to the idea that there really is something to the plant-health claims that BASF is making."

Reilly was drawn to the BASF product line because of the company's passion for protecting the environment matches his



own. "They label plant health as part of the design of their products," he says. "So, if we're looking at it from a health standpoint as opposed to a disease model, that made me lean toward BASF."

Reilly and Key have worked together for three years now and have built a solid relationship. "I enjoy the accessibility and transparency of working with Chris," Reilly says. "He understands my challenges, is always there to offer the latest research, and is a realist when it comes to the time and place for the BASF products."

Reilly gets solid results from BASF products with relatively minimal input. "We can treat for the myriad of disease pressure and keep our inputs to a minimum, as well as our costs," he adds. "What we all suffer from, I think sometimes, is the idea that 'A little works and more is better.' That's the kind of thinking that can get things out of whack. I got response out of this nitrogen product, so I'm going to put more nitrogen down. I think many, many people have made those kinds of mistakes so we don't have to any more. We all can suffer from being an overwaterer, which also can lead to disease pressure. At other times, we can suffer from our egos and take our greens to the edge by lowering heights of cut and shutting off the water to increase green speed and firmness."

As he heads into the peak of his 2015-16 season, Reilly's turf concerns remain, including fairy ring, which has reappeared. But he's confident that BASF has provided him with the tools to ward off problems.

"If you had talked to me 10 years ago, I'd have tried to tell you, 'I'm an organic farmer that's a golf course superintendent,'" Reilly says. "Now I would say I seek the ideal balance between maximizing playability for our members and guests while sustaining plant health." **GCI**

Rick Woelfel is a Philadelphia-based writer and a frequent GCI contributor.