

I've been writing about turfgrass for nearly 20 years now, and it's amazing how things have changed in that short period of time. One term that I used to hear with regularity—and that has now practically disappeared from the lexicon—is South German bentgrass. As recently as the 1980s greenkeepers still talked about “converting from the South German bents,” or that the greens “used to be South German bent,” or that “the course was originally planted in South German bent.” I don't know how widespread the turf was outside the northeastern United States, but here it was pervasive.

As greens featuring South German bent become extinct, I wanted to educate myself on exactly what comprised these surfaces. Perhaps some of this will be new information to a few of you; or maybe I was the only one who flung the term around without knowing its origin. With little information in modern turfgrass

texts, I found many answers in the 1925-1926 Fraser's International Golf Yearbook containing an article by A. N. Peckham of Kingston, R.I.

This mixture of ancient turfgrass seeds actually originated in Europe, though not exclusively in Germany. Seed was harvested commercially in Holland, Belgium and England as well; and then exported to the United States, New Zealand and parts of South America. At the start of the 20th century, South German bent was just about the only seeded bentgrass available and many of the individual bents that followed it were selected and developed from this mixture.

There were three the varieties that would flourish in the Northeast: Colonial bent comprised nearly 75 percent of the mix, velvet bent (or dog brown bent) accounted for 15 percent and creeping bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*) was the remainder. They were adapted to a variety of soils, resistant to cold, tolerant of

hot weather and produced good turf in just one season.

The grasses complemented each other in a way that protected greenkeepers from losing their entire putting surface to one catastrophe. They also gave greens a multicolored and textural surface that not only looked great, but provided points of reference for putting. (As in, “Aim it toward that purple patch left of the hole, and it'll break toward that light green area before the cup.”) Colonial was the anchor of the mixture, a grass that was native to Europe but became known as browntop, New Zealand, Northwest, Prince Edward Island and Rhode Island bentgrasses in new environments. Although known for the locale in which they proliferated, these grasses demonstrated few botanical differences from each other. The turf had poor tolerance for wear, heat and excessive water; but, it established quickly and could be mowed lower than any other variety—important characteristics in the early years of American golf.

The velvet was never as wear-resistant as colonial, nor did it establish as quickly, or grow or spread as rapidly. However, it provided a gorgeous color and an excellent putting surface once established, and naturally resisted disease better than the others.

South German also included approximately two percent *Agrostis stolonifera* or creeping bentgrass—and as turfgrass research developed at universities and extension services this was the grass scientists felt could revolutionize golf. Peckham wrote, “True creeping bent is a turfgrass that spreads by jointed creeping

stems or stolons, as they are called. These runners or stolons have the ability to take root at the joints or nodes and these form a new plant. This method of propagating itself gives creeping bent a wonderful advantage in turf forming qualities, as any divots or other injuries to the turf are quickly healed by the creeping runners.”

Right from the start, scientists and turf care professionals realized that creeping bent was the turf of the future, and years of university research and field trials would eventually result in the introduction of Penncross, the most widely planted turfgrass in history. Commercially available by 1954, Penncross initiated the era of mono-stands, and spelled the end of South German bents.

In recent years, Penncross has been replaced by the new generation of boutique bents that provide uniform surfaces that look like concrete painted light green—and have just about as much character. Today, a few turf managers have seen the wisdom of planting several bentgrass varieties on their greens, mimicking the lovely patchwork of the early South German greens. Those are the greens I'm attracted to, especially late on an autumn afternoon when the subtle color hues are evident. They almost look like the old South German greens I remember putting on when I was a kid. No matter how much things change, in some ways they stay exactly the same. 🌿

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