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# GOLF COURSE

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Golf Course Superintendents Association of America

## Ground Rules

Superintendents and the Rules of Golf



OFFICIAL PUBLICATION

# Solid Approach to Sodding

One Texas course sods for instant play and reduced maintenance.

David Doguet

The tee areas are sodded. The bunker faces, sodded. Roughs? Sodded. And the fairways? Yup, they're sodded too.

When three businessmen in San Antonio got together to build the Briggs Ranch Golf Club, they decided to do it right. And that included covering almost every square inch of the course — more than 90 acres — with turfgrass sod.

Solid sodding provides a more immediate playing surface than seeding or sprigging. This spares course personnel the time and energy that usually go into the turf's grow-in stage, and it allows the course to open for play sooner.



Workers at Briggs Ranch installed more than 90 acres of turfgrass sod making the course look "like it's been there forever."

### Dollars and sense

For the owners of the par-72, 7,206-yard Briggs Ranch course, which opened in late 2001, the decision to sod the course wall-to-wall was largely financial.

"It just makes sense from an investment standpoint," says Buddy Cook, part owner of Briggs Ranch and veteran of golf course construction and management. Cook has launched four other golf courses in Texas and one in California.

In constructing most courses with warm season grasses, workers sprig the flat areas and sod around the tee areas and green complexes at a total cost of \$300,000 to \$500,000. Such courses, however, typically take six months or longer to establish themselves. According to turf researchers, it's possible solid-sodded courses can reach that level of playability in as little as one month.

While it's still too early to determine the total cost savings they will realize by solid sodding, the Briggs Ranch owners expect to profit more in the long term.

To solid sod Briggs Ranch cost roughly \$1 million initially, but the instant playing surface provided by turfgrass sod allowed the club to open much sooner. If

they had not sodded, the owners estimate they could have easily spent a total of \$1 million over a couple years seeding and sprigging, maintaining and repairing the grass, and waiting for it to mature.

By sodding, the owners opened Briggs Ranch and started collecting private membership fees and monthly dues immediately.

Tom Fazio, the renowned golf course designer responsible for the Briggs Ranch course, says there are two major advantages to this approach. First, the course opened from six months to eight months earlier than it would have had it been seeded or sprigged.

Second, with an attractive, finished course to show prospective members, owners can sell memberships with less effort.

"From day one, the owners of Briggs Ranch can exhibit a mature, established golf course," says Fazio. "It leaves nothing to the imagination, which makes it all the more attractive to potential members."

"With solid sod and the excellent job done by the contractors, the course looks like it's been here forever," adds Bill Bedford, superintendent and director of

agronomy at Briggs Ranch and the Golf Club of Texas in San Antonio, and former superintendent of La Cantera in San Antonio and Barton Creek in Austin, Texas.

The team at Briggs Ranch also will save money on the solid-sodded course's reduced maintenance requirements.

"The course will require a lot less water and fertilizer, because the grass is already established," says Bill Rogers, co-owner of Briggs Ranch, 1981 British Open champion and former director of golf at San Antonio Country Club.

"With sod, we don't have to worry about the costs of erosion control and turf repairs," adds Gil Hodge, Cook's partner in Briggs Ranch and the Golf Club of Texas.

### Positively environmental

Though the long-term financial advantages of solid sodding were enough to make it an obvious choice for Briggs Ranch, this approach also offers environmental benefits.

In addition to immediate coverage, sod provides immediate and effective erosion control. Seeded or sprigged courses



## Erosion control is of particular importance at Briggs Ranch, because parts of the course lie on

in their grow-in stage can lose topsoil, fertilizers and pesticides during hard rains. Briggs Ranch, however, already covered with a strong mat of turfgrass sod, experienced minimal runoff from the day the sod was laid.

“Erosion control is a major environmental positive of this course,” says Fazio. “In fact, you will even get this benefit on a course sodded with dormant grass, as a few have started to do.”

Erosion control is of particular importance at Briggs Ranch, because parts of the course lie on rolling terrain. For example, the bunkers here are cut into the sides of naturally occurring mounds. Sod helps prevent the bunkers from sloughing off.

The sodded surface also has pollution control properties. Established turf filters many of the impurities that contaminate rain or irrigation water. The thatch and root zone areas of the turf plant trap most chemicals and other particulate pollutants and return cleaner water to ground-

**rolling terrain. For example, the bunkers here are cut into the sides of naturally occurring mounds. Sod helps prevent the bunkers from sloughing off.**

water supplies.

In fact, water running off or passing through the turf on a well-managed course is not likely to be of significantly lower quality than the tap water available in many cities.

Other immediate benefits of sod to the Briggs Ranch course environment include cooling effects, noise and glare reduction and oxygen replenishment.

And that’s not to mention its aesthetic and safety advantages over a bare-soil, hard-surfaced area where grass is still growing in.

### A first in solid sodding

Golf course professionals who want to sod wall-to-wall must be careful to select the turfgrass variety that best fits their region, climate and terrain. Briggs Ranch is distinctive in that it’s one of the few sodded with zoysiagrass — in fact, it’s the first course in Texas solid sodded with zoysia.

“We picked Zeon zoysia because it is the best grass for this property and region,” says Fazio. “In this environment, it will green up in the spring and by early next summer, it will look sensational.”

While most solid-sodded courses in the South have used bermudagrass, the team at Briggs Ranch selected this warm-season grass from Southeast Asia for its appearance, playability and low maintenance. “Zeon zoysia is a very attractive variety, and players often remark how great it is to hit balls off this grass,” says Cook.

Zoysia is denser, finer-textured and



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more upright in its growth than many other grasses. These qualities combine to create an unhindered playing surface on which the ball sits raised from the ground. Many golfers find it to be an outstanding striking surface.

Bedford was pleased with the selection of zoysiagrass for its lower maintenance requirements. Its slow growth means reduced mowing, which in turn reduces green waste and fuel consumption by mowing equipment.

"I have noticed a lot fewer clippings out on the course," says Bedford. "Once the zoysia is fully established, I expect we will not have to mow it as often as we would other surfaces."

He also appreciates zoysia's drought tolerance. With lower irrigation requirements, this variety uses less water than others, saving course owners money and freeing superintendents for other maintenance.

"During a San Antonio summer, periods of 70 to 100 consecutive days of 100-plus-degree temperatures pose a challenge to grass health," says Bedford. "But this Zeon strain of zoysia has rated

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very high in test trials for drought tolerance, so we're not worried."

For the greens, the only areas of the course not sodded, Fazio, Bedford and the owners selected an L93/Crenshaw bentgrass blend. A very fine-leaved grass and common selection for greens, this variety strongly resists heat and disease.

#### On top of the course

Briggs Ranch lies in the middle of two valleys, just above the fault line that marks the threshold of Texas hill country. The course features a sodded 18-acre practice facility, natural rolling terrain and varied vegetation including century-old live oaks, purple mountain laurel, persimmon and wildflowers.

Adjacent to the club, the owners are constructing an upscale housing development, The Estates at Briggs Ranch. The gated community will eventually comprise about 300 homes.

"With an experienced, compatible management team and the goal of creating the finest course possible, Briggs Ranch will come to be recognized as one of the best golf environments in Texas," says Fazio.



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