

Making a Case for Zoysia and Sports Fields

By Robert Meyer
EDITOR IN CHIEF

David Doguet and Bladerunner Farms showcase zoysiagrasses at a September field day

DO the phrases “increased usage” and “higher expectations” sound familiar? If so, you’re not alone. Many field managers — at all levels, in all parts of the country — now find themselves in situations where this is an everyday reality. With that being said, the first step in handling this demand for more of everything is a turfgrass that can stand up to the challenges.

David Doguet, president of Bladerunner Farms in Poteet, Texas, believes that zoysiagrasses are ready to step up to the plate and meet these challenges.

“Some field managers have high school fields, where they have football, soccer and band

concerts. You’re managing so many events that the bermudagrass fields are wearing out,” Doguet told an assembled group of field managers at Bladerunner’s Zoysiagrass Field Day on Sept. 21. “We’re trying to get you some grasses that will prevent you from going to artificial fields. Our hope is that in the future, we’ll have developed zoysiagrasses that hold up much better than current bermudagrasses do. We want to develop grasses that will hopefully hold up to all the play and traffic you get.”

The Field Day, held in conjunction with the Texas Sports Turf Managers Association and sponsored by Campey Imants, Green Up Services, Redox and Trimax Mowing Systems, gave a group of field managers the chance to see up close what zoysiagrasses are all about. According to Bladerunner Farms, zoysiagrasses possess a “wide range of temperature and geographical adaptability, tolerance to varying pH levels and soil types, extremely low nitrogen input requirements,



David Doguet, standing on the tee box of the 16th hole, was the man behind the Olympic Golf Course’s Zeon zoysiagrass this summer in Rio.



Bladerunner Farms, in Poteet, Texas, hosted a Zoysiagrass Field Day on Sept. 21. Field managers from around the region were educated on why zoysia can be a good choice for athletic fields.

built-in mechanisms to extract salts from the soil and a full spectrum of leaf textures, from fine to coarse.”

“Zoysia is a game-changer because of its ability to provide a quality playing surface without all the inputs needed by other species like cool-season grasses, bermudas and paspalums,” Doguet said. “We were looking for a grass that could handle shade, sunlight, clay soils, sandy soils and salt conditions.”

Back in 2000, Bladerunner Farms (a family-owned and operated business) obtained the zoysiagrass collection developed by Jack Murray, a turf breeder with the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture/Agricultural Research Service in Beltsville, Maryland. In late 2009, Bladerunner Farms and the University of Georgia Research Foundation signed an agreement making this material — the biggest private collection of Zoysia germplasm in the world — available to the University of Georgia turfgrass program.

“We started growing zoysia because, in our minds, we wanted to find a grass that would work everywhere,” Doguet explained.

While Bladerunner Farms had extensive field experience, its staff lacked the strict scientific protocols and knowledge utilized by top-level university programs that were needed to take zoysiagrass to the next level of development.

Enter Dr. Brian Schwartz and the University of Georgia’s turf breeding program. Schwartz, head of Georgia’s Tifton campus



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turfgrass breeding program, came from Texas A&M and the University of Florida, where he previously worked with many turfgrass types, including zoysia.

Schwartz was on hand at Bladerunner’s Zoysia Field Day to explain how far zoysia research has come and why it’s a good fit for athletic fields.

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Zoysia was certainly emerging this summer, as Bladerunner’s Zeon zoysia variety was the grass used on the fairways, rough and tees at the Olympic Golf Course in Rio for the Summer Olympics.

“My focus has been on golf, but as we got further and further looking into sports fields, we started wondering, ‘Why aren’t we there?’” Doguet said. “We’re learning, too. We’re not sports field specialists, yet. We will be. We want interaction from [field managers] and we want [field managers] to tell us what [they] need.”

As far as the golf side, zoysiagrass can be found at several high-profile courses across the country, including Bluejack National (a Tiger Woods design in suburban Houston) and Trinity Forest (a Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw design in suburban Dallas). Doguet mentioned that Bladerunner has sent zoysiagrass as far North as a golf course in New York. Doguet reported that Bladerunner is also scheduled to send some zoysia varieties to Sweden for test plots on select soccer fields there.

As of mid-September, Bladerunner Farms had about 3,000 varieties of zoysiagrass in the testing phase. Three varieties — the aforementioned Zeon, along with JaMur and L1F — were available on the market for use on sports fields as of Sept. 28.

According to Bladerunner Farms, JaMur and Zeon both have a superior rate of spread and stolon frequency, in addition to decreased thatch formation when compared with earlier zoysia hybrids. Zeon is also noted for its dark green color and soft leaf texture.

“The genetics within zoysiagrass gives it the ability to react well to various management strategies,” Schwartz said. “Less fertility and more shade tolerance give it a leg up in certain situations.” **SFM**



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