

# Versatile turf for flexible design

Tahoma 31 was the ideal choice for a new reversible nine-hole par-three course in Philadelphia.



**Stacie Zinn Roberts**

Stacie Zinn Roberts is a marketing strategist for Tahoma 31 and an award-winning writer and marketing expert with more than 25 years of experience.

The first time I ever saw a golf course, I was about seven years old. There was a playground adjacent to my elementary school in Northeast Philadelphia and one afternoon, I scaled a steep hill behind the swingset and entered a deep, dark woods. A dirt path led through the tall, spindly trees, and sunlight dappled through the leaves. At the end of the path, a long green hillside sloped down gently to an enormous white house, the likes of which I'd never seen before. As my friends and I held our collective breath, we felt as if we'd stumbled upon a secret fairyland.

When I got home, I excitedly told my mother. She said the enchanted fairyland was the Torresdale-Frankford Country Club. The green slope was part of the golf course

designed more than 100 years ago by Donald Ross, and the mansion at the bottom of the hill was the clubhouse.

Many years later, in 2014, the club was renamed as The Union League Golf Club at Torresdale. It is one of four owned by The Union League of Philadelphia, a patriotic society founded in 1862 to support the policies of Abraham Lincoln and now a city club with over 4,000 members.

On the crest of the hill I'd climbed as a child, The Landing at Torresdale opened in May 2024 as an all-new par-three, nine-hole reversible course, designed by Steve Weisser, ASGCA, of Rees Jones, Inc. The goal was to take some of the pressure off of the main 18-hole course, and offer an additional amenity on a previously



Photo: The Union League Golf Club

*The Landing at Torresdale has Tahoma 31 bermudagrass on all playing surfaces except for greens, which are bentgrass*

untouched 25 acres in the bustling urban neighborhood that is landlocked on all sides by Northeast Airport, shopping areas, the school playground and established homes.

Weisser, along with the club's leadership team, agronomy staff and project manager Chase McEvers,

can be easily made by simply moving tee markers. The bermudagrass continues to the perimeter of the in-play areas, where it sweeps up the slopes and down into grass collection areas. The areas beyond were seeded in fescue to transition out to the native surrounds.

of golf into a small area while also making it feel organic to the site. "Donald Ross greens traditionally slope from back to front," says Scott Bordner, Director of Agronomy for The Union League. "We talked about trying to throw in Ross features to The Landing. In order to play it from two directions, you can't have it falling away from the golfer from one side and facing towards the golfer or the other."

Instead, the decision to have no tee boxes allows for a myriad of approaches. "It's just the greens and fairways all around. So you could go even beyond the two set directions we have, you could really jump into it from a lot of different angles and play a little different golf course each time," says Bordner. "There is 70-feet or so of elevation change

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devised a brilliant solution to maximize the usability of the 25-acre space. The nine-hole course has no definable tee boxes, and no rough.

Greens were seeded with a mix of bentgrass, while all other surfaces feature Tahoma 31 bermudagrass. It is mowed uniformly at a half-inch so a change in the direction of play

The Union League has made a concerted effort to grow the game; at each of its four locations, members are encouraged to take one free lesson each week. Creating a short course offers those new to the game the chance to try out their skills.

Weisser and The Union League team had to find a way to fit a lot



*Tahoma 31 sod was laid on 80,400 square feet of green surrounds and slopes*

on the property. The same hole can play downhill one day and uphill the next. It doesn't feel like you are on the same golf course when the routing is the opposite direction."

"Our goal was to not have people play it one time and say, you know, that was fun, but I don't have to do it again," says Weisser. "It's playable for beginners, but interesting enough that people would keep using it."

From a design standpoint, the wear tolerance of a fast-healing warm-season grass like Tahoma 31 bermuda provides versatility for a shorter course with a smaller grassed surface.

"Tahoma 31 was part of the design philosophy," says Weisser. "You can imagine the amount of wear that tees of a par-three course get. To be able to play clockwise one week and counterclockwise the other week, you're able to spread

the wear out. And that was part of the reason we were using Tahoma 31 – for recovery."

Warm-season Tahoma 31 bermudagrass, is known for its cold hardiness and drought resistance. The NFL's Philadelphia Eagles and MLS's Philadelphia Union play on Tahoma 31 at their stadiums, and both University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Phillies teams practice on, so it was only a matter of time before a Philadelphia-based golf course took the leap to use the grass beyond driving ranges and tee boxes. Prior to construction, superintendent Andrew Dooley visited with the Eagles' head groundskeeper Tony Leonard to discuss planting Tahoma 31.

Dooley says: "We went for an afternoon field trip

the day after a thunderstorm. Tony said, 'Last night you were probably sweating and you couldn't sleep because you thought your fairways and greens might have pythium. When it thunders and lightnings and you get two inches of



rain, it's the best thing for Tahoma 31. And when it's dry and my irrigation system doesn't work, it's the best thing for Tahoma 31. It can just handle anything'."

That endorsement gave the team the confidence to proceed. The course was shaped in-house and grassed in spring and summer 2023. Tahoma 31 sod, grown by Central Sod of Maryland, was laid on 80,400 square feet of green surrounds and slopes. For 8.86 acres of fairways and tees, 10,632 bushels were sprigged.

Having previously only managed cool-season grasses, Dooley noted key differences in Tahoma 31 turfgrass management: Less mowing – Dooley says the divot recovery is good but the vertical growth is fairly slow, which is an advantage.

The crew only mows Tahoma 31 once a week which saves on labor. It retains its color – although the bermudagrass will go dormant in the winter, Dooley says he has no plans to overseed. He doesn't expect play in the winter to warrant the cost or labor of overseeding. Plus, this past winter the grass stayed green longer than expected. He says: "The Tahoma 31 stayed fairly green until Thanksgiving. That was a surprise to us. We thought it would be brown by Halloween". "It requires less fertilizer – this past summer the club was still heavily fertilizing the Tahoma 31 to push the grass, which in the sprigged areas is 99 percent filled in. Dooley says he expects to use dramatically less fertilizer next year.

Still, converting to bermudagrass

this far north in the Transition Zone, to be the first ones in the area to do it to this extent, took faith on the part of the members and the staff.

"There's a learning curve for someone who's never done it before," says Dooley. "But into the heat of summer, I have no concerns that the grass is dying. On the other hand, the bentgrass/poa greens here, we have to check five, six times a day."

The members wanted reassurance too. Dooley says. "On opening day, one of the members who was not really in favor of bermudagrass said, 'Andrew, is this bermudagrass? It looks like bentgrass!' No one can tell the difference apart from a superintendent on hands and knees pulling out the stolons and rhizomes."

The seven-year old me smiled at that thought. ●

*The Landing was designed by Steve Weisser, ASGCA, with golfers able to play the nine-hole layout in two directions*

