



CLIMATE CHANGE CAUSES RETHINKING IN ITALY'S GOLF SCENE

The water becomes more expensive, and it becomes less. The energy to run the pumps is becoming increasingly expensive, and climate experts agree that heat waves and droughts like those in Italy over the past two years will be more frequent in the future. The circumstances for operating a golf course are changing. So strong that Italy's golf courses are in a state of upheaval right now.

Is Bermuda grass the solution?

Bermuda grass is on the rise. The cool season grasses that have been common to date seem to become more and more of a problem on the courses, even in parts of Northern Italy. "Especially after the last two to three extremely dry summers, and give that we have to work without herbicides, we realized that you can't produce good quality grass any more." **Alessandro De Luca, Head of the Green Section of the Italian Golf Federation**, completed the changeover at **Golf della Montecchia** near Padua ten years ago. "It was the right decision," he says today.

Golf della Montecchia is not the only club that has recognized the signs of the times. The hot, dry summers have made one thing clear to many operators. If you want to deliver good quality with the previously common cool season grasses, you must have access to large amounts of water and a lavish budget. The consumption of 150,000 m³ of water for 18 holes, which then indeed occurs, is no longer justifiable in view of the general water shortage in Southern Europe.



Drought damage discourages players

The water is expensive if it does not come from the company's ponds, and electricity costs for the sprinkler system sum up. If neither is present, the fairways and semiroughs present a pitiful picture. The grass dies, bare patches form, and weeds emerge. "Many golf clubs have to start an expensive reseeding program every year," De Luca explains. In addition, members and green fee players complain about the poor quality of the golf courses. The golfer doesn't care what grass he plays on or where the water comes from. What matters for him is that it looks good and plays well.

La Bagnaia: top-quality plus water management

At [Royal Golf La Bagnaia near Siena](#), it's early December as we talk to **General Manager Martin Shaw** about water management and grass. The view from the clubhouse is of Robert Trent Jones Jr's excellent 18-hole course, which opened in 2011 and was laid out with Bermuda grass from the start. Between the holes, you can see the five lush lakes where the rainwater is collected in winter. "We've been fortunate this summer because we've had very good playing conditions the whole time and a lot of other courses in the area haven't because of the heat," Shaw sums up. An on-site spring is available for emergencies, and the head greenkeeper keeps water consumption low anyway, thanks to constant moisture measurements. Irrigation is adjusted daily, and the course has coped recognizably well with heat and drought.

The tourist and the brown grass

The brown shade of Bermuda grass, which goes dormant in winter, is not perceived as a problem here. Overseeding, Shaw said, is not an issue for La Bagnaia because they close for about six weeks anyway. However, it is precisely the brownish colour that many other operators of Italian golf courses definitely struggle with. "Regions such as Lake Garda, Milan or Abano Terme have many

tourists from Germany, Austria or Switzerland in winter,” explains Alessandro de Luca of the Golf Association. Most golfers do not realize that the brown shade does not represent a loss of quality. If a patch of dark green *Poa Annua* or possibly weeds is mixed in at one point or another, the patchy appearance quickly becomes a problem. “After we work here in Italy without herbicides, many clubs then rely on overseeding in the winter,” the agronomist sums up. It still remains the more economical solution for the clubs because they save on water and energy.

The transformation process for Italy’s golf courses is still in its early stages. From the first five courses **La Bagnaia, Frassanella, Bologna, Le Fonti and La Montecchia** has now become a larger group, which, for example, also the Roman clubs **Golf Nazionale, Parco di Roma, Castelgandolfo and Olgiata** includes as well as **Chervo Golf**. The **Universities in Pisa and Florence** together with the Green Section of the Italian Golf Federation are supporting the process with an adaptability study at Golf Club Firenze. Local greenkeepers are also beginning to adapt.

None of this is easy: Golfers want to be on their course year-round, and an extended closure for seeding new grasses is rarely accepted. “The management of the grass is also different because it only has one strong growing season yearly,” de Luca explains. “The greenkeepers must adjust to the new grass first, gain experience.”

The trend is probably unstoppable. Climate change is putting pressure, and the economic arguments also favour moving away from the old. Water and energy conservation are high on the agenda. In a country whose golf courses live strongly from tourism, harmony must be achieved between quality, profitability and sustainability. Sometimes just a different type of grass can help.

