



THE ULTIMATE BACK-YARD PUTTING GREEN
TODAY'S SYNTHETIC SURFACES ARE
MORE HIGH TECH—AND MORE REALISTIC—
THAN EVER BEFORE / BY RON WHITTEN



Jerry Marti and son Jeremy on their 6,500-square-foot synthetic green in Lamar, Mo. Opening pages: The back-yard green of Matt Keller in Scottsdale.

IN SOME WAYS THIS IS BETTER

than living on a golf course, it occurs to me. You can slip out in slippers if the mood strikes. You can stride right off the patio onto the tee. Never a tee time, never a delay when you've got a golf hole in your back yard.

OK, the scale is slightly off. The tee box is tiny, literally the size of something you wipe your feet on, and the green looks small, too, although I'm told it's almost 2,000 square feet, the size of some houses. I figure it has to be a lot easier to hit a house from 60 yards than that little patch of turf.

There's a seven-foot privacy fence just to the right and behind the green. That fence could come in handy, I think, as I drop a ball onto the tee, which is nylon and provides a perfect hairbrush lie. As I swing a sand wedge through the fibers, they bend but don't break. No divot—that's a plus.

My ball drops on the green, hops once

and stops. I try half a dozen shots. I pull one left and hit two short, into a bunker at the right-front corner. But the others hit the green and quickly stop. Didn't need the fence after all.

As I walk to the green, my hosts point out that the rolling carpet of deep green beneath my feet is polyurethane. Up on the green, that's polypropylene, with tons of sand between fibers to provide the necessary resilience to hold pitch shots.

Once on the putting surface, I stomp around, bounce up and down, even drag my feet. The turf is cushy, like a real green, not rock hard.

But will it putt? Straight and true, it turns out, and plenty fast. This stuff is remarkable. It looks, feels and plays like real grass.

Not every back-yard golf hole uses fake grass—excuse me, synthetic turf—from tee to green, but here in Scottsdale, where the earth's crust rises to the surface, the real stuff just won't grow without extraordinary measures.

Which is why real-estate developer Matt Keller

had Weston Weber of Southwest Greens drive over from his Scottsdale office to install this vest-pocket golf hole next to the swimming pool and full-size basketball court. Total cost of the hole: \$90,000.

Keller's was one of a dozen synthetic-turf holes I sampled nationwide recently. They differed in size, shape, length, brand and cost, but they played the same. You can hit full shots into these things with realistic results—I stopped 6-irons on one in Missouri—and attempt challenging sidehill putts with your normal putting stroke.

Synthetic greens don't need daily watering and mowing, or expensive fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.

OK, fungus can form on plastic surfaces. So you spray a little bathtub cleaner on the stuff once in a while. "They're not no-maintenance," Weber says of his Southwest Greens product, "but they're low-maintenance. I can't think of

anything you would buy for \$5,000 or more that doesn't require some kind of maintenance. Even paintings on a wall need dusting."

The only drawback is that the cups are in fixed positions on a synthetic green, so don't get into a putting contest with a homeowner. Local knowledge is never greater than in someone's back yard.

Although artificial turf has been around since the 1960s, back-yard golf greens have been a cottage industry for about a dozen years. That's when the latest wave of sand-filled polypropylene turf was developed, supplementing nylon turf, which uses little or no sand and is still great for indoor putting greens but concrete-hard for outdoor pitch shots. (See "How to pick the right green for your home" below.)

In the last few years, the business has mushroomed. In much the way oil became black gold, synthetic golf greens have become plastic money. It's now a lucrative second career for any number of installers.

HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT GREEN FOR YOUR HOME

A practice green usually costs \$10 to \$15 a square foot installed, whether you choose nylon or polypropylene. The best choice depends on how you plan to use the green and where you want it.

Indoors: Your best bet here is a nylon turf, which is denser than polypropylene and needs no sand infill. You could add a little sand to firm the blades and increase the putting speed of the green, but it might leave a mess in your rec room because the sand will tend to stick to your shoes.

A green off the patio: Nylon works and usually offers a longer warranty because it lasts longer. But if you want bold contours or want to hit chip shots to it, then go with polypropylene.

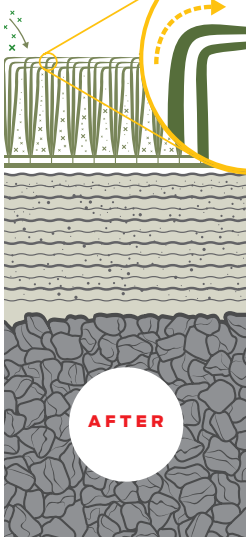
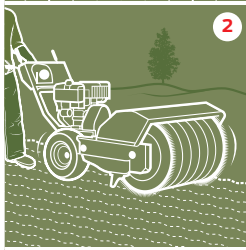
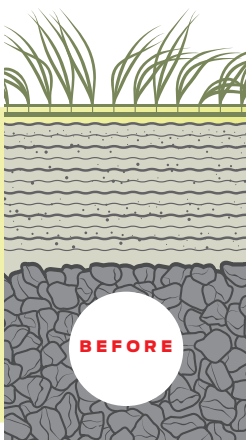
A full back-yard practice area: If you want to hit high pitch shots or bunker shots onto it, definitely go with polypropylene for the putting surface and nylon for the tee boxes.

No matter what, don't try to install it yourself. Even if you've personally re-carpeted your home (and actually like the way it looks), it's wise to pay for professional installation of a synthetic green, which requires drainage, contours and elimination of grain. Most dealers won't offer warranties to do-it-yourself installations. **R.W.**

SYNTHESIS OF A GREEN

Today's best artificial greens are built on two levels of crushed aggregate. Their polypropylene "grass" strands are about an inch long.

To create a surface that can hold a shot hit from off the green, installers distribute (1) several pounds of sand and silica per square foot of turf. Next they force (2) the sand and silica deep into the green's fibers with a powerful broom. Finally, they roll (3) the turf to bend the tops of the strands, resulting in a smooth and fast-rolling green.



THE INSIDE PITCH

Weber, 43, is a former minor-league pitcher drafted out of Minnesota's Mankato State in 1986 by the Oakland A's. He pitched six seasons of Triple-A ball, against up-and-comers such as Ken Griffey Jr. and Alex Rodriguez. In 1995, Weber injured his shoulder and, during rehabilitation, went to work with some buddies, ballplayers Steve Scarsone and Kerry Woodson, and umpire Scott Griggs, who had formed a back-yard greens partnership named after themselves—SWG.

Weber saw more potential in the business than they did. In 1998, he bought them out, kept the initials but changed the name to Southwest Greens—and took it from a local operation into the world's largest synthetic-greens franchise business, called Southwest Putting Green Technologies. Weber has sold 70 franchises stateside and 20 overseas, at prices ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000, depending on location and climate. Franchisers pay him annual fees based on the number of feet of turf they purchase. In turn, they're trained in installation of the brand at the Scottsdale home office by the SPGT staff, including Tom Riha, the man who trained Weber. Now in his early 50s, Riha, a native of Omaha, a diehard Cornhusker football fan and father-in-law of Heisman Trophy winner Eric Crouch, is a pioneer in artificial-green installation, responsible for the original "Academy Live" set on the Golf Channel, among others.

Putting-green turf has changed little in the past 10 years, Weber says. What has changed is the fringe, the "first cuts" and the rough turf, which is now significantly better. It allows Weber and his competitors to create tee-to-green back-yard holes that are entirely synthetic.

Weber and his wife, Gina Ptaszek-Weber, whose firm handles his marketing, could well be the Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie of the turfgrass set. An attractive, (CONTINUED ON PAGE 155)



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athletic couple, they have endless enthusiasm for the business and have an array of product endorsements from Vijay Singh, Jim Furyk, Sergio Garcia, David Toms, Fred Funk and Hale Irwin, who appear in their latest brochure.

Southwest also has a tie-in with Nicklaus Design. For a \$3- to \$5-per-foot upcharge, Weber will send a customer’s ideas to the Nicklaus Design team, which converts them into blueprints with precise elevations, pin placements, chipping areas and bunkers. It was Nicklaus’ son-in-law Bill O’Leary who came up with an idea of rolling synthetic turf over sand bags to form faces that bulge as they descend into a bunker, now a standard Southwest Greens practice on back-yard holes.

Scottsdale seems like the logical location for a synthetic-turf company. Because of the weather, no city installs more greens per year. But the center of the synthetic-turf universe might be Dalton, Ga. Once the carpet-mill capital of the world, Dalton is home to five big-name turf manufacturers and dozens of small ones, churning out a million square feet or more a month for playgrounds, ball fields, even home lawns. Only a fraction is putting-green turf.

Among the bigger players is X-Grass Worldwide Turf Solutions, which recently acquired the SofTrak brand of synthetic putting green. There are roughly 50 active SofTrak dealerships nationwide as well as a few overseas, says Steve White Jr., president and owner of X-Grass. He insists that all materials, including infill, be purchased through the main office. The company’s stable of pro endorsers includes Fred Couples, Chris DiMarco, Rich Beem, Bruce Lietzke and Steve Flesch—as well as University of Texas football coach Mack Brown.

Though White’s company sells some basic back-yard greens that do-it-yourselfers could assemble, only a dealer can install the SofTrak brand. “The right ingredients absolutely give you a head start, but for the best green you’ve got to have professional installation,” he says.

One common complaint about all synthetic greens, particularly those on back-yard holes, is

that sooner or later they get too hard to hit shots onto and too fast to putt.

Every company has a solution to the problem. Weber’s is a “polyurethane underlayment,” a thin pad beneath the turf. “The cushion beneath our greens makes the difference,” Weber says. “The cushion flexes, and when it flexes, it releases the sand above it, so it’ll never lock up. It’s not rocket science. Every time you walk across the green, it keeps the sand loose.”

Danny Little (who, with Lance Pierce, founded SofTrak and sold it to White’s company earlier this year) perceived that angular sand tends to pack, so he came up with an acrylic-coated quartz that’s manufactured as round beads. Because his infill has only round edges, the stuff, like a box of marbles, will never pack firm. SofTrak requires the top 15 percent of infill be black and green, to add a more authentic color to his greens.

I examined SofTrak’s infill firsthand at the home of Little’s first client, Jerry Marti. An Oklahoma State grad who wanted to be an airline pilot but instead went into food service, Marti’s reward for being the 1992 valedictorian of Hamburger University was a McDonald’s restaurant franchise in his hometown of Lamar.

Five years ago, Little convinced Marti to

YOU STILL WANT THE REAL THING?

Assuming you can find someone to do it for you (try local golf course superintendents), a real grass green will cost about \$8 to \$10 per square foot to build. Plus you will need a decent irrigation system. So a tiny, 500-square-foot practice green would cost about \$7,500. A 1,000-square-foot green would be about double that.

In other words, you'll pay about the same amount as you would for a synthetic green. The difference is in the maintenance. With a real green, you'll have to water it, of course, and you'll need a lawn service to mow it at least five times a week during the season. And the lawn service will likely need to apply pesticides, fungicides and herbicides. Most lawn services work at their convenience, not yours, but putting greens are notorious for stressing out in hot weather. Having an expert on call would add to your monthly costs. The annual maintenance budget for a small grass back-yard green will be about \$5,000.

You want a full back-yard golf hole, with a tee and bunkers and a regulation size green? That will run you about \$120,000 to build and a minimum of \$10,000 a year to maintain.

R.W.

install a synthetic green behind his house, just south of town. His 30-foot-long putting green is edged by a rock garden with a waterfall and a patio with a park bench on which sits a life-size plastic model of Ronald McDonald.

At first, Marti used the green only occasionally, but his then-5-year-old son, Jeremy, took an immediate interest in it. Jeremy would putt on it early in the day, during the heat of the afternoon, late into the evening, even while it was raining. Golf became his special focus, his passion, even his inspiration. Jeremy was born with Down syndrome, and until he took up putting, he could hardly walk up a flight of stairs. Now he was holing 10- and 20-footers.

Sensing long-term therapeutic value, Marti contacted Little, and together they installed a full-size golf hole next to a pond in front of the house at a cost of \$25,000. Marti patterned it after one of his favorite holes, the par-3 14th at The King and The Bear golf course at the World Golf Village in Florida, the only collaborative design by Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer. As luck would have it, the uncle of Palmer’s design partner, the late Ed Seay, lived in Lamar, and with his help, Little was able to obtain the original blueprint of the hole.

Marti’s front-yard hole features a two-level green of 6,500 square feet of synthetic turf, fronted by the pond and two big sand bunkers. Nine tees are located at intervals along the far edge of the pond. The hole measures from 86 yards to more than 235 yards. A second regulation-size green is planned for the other end of a field—using a soon-to-be-released upgrade of SofTrak turf, with 15 percent more fiber tips—so he and Jeremy can play a full 18 holes.

Now 11 years old, Jeremy Marti learned the full game in his front yard. He understands its rules, its etiquette and its challenges. He has competed in Special Olympics tournaments, winning his division twice, and has teamed with his dad in charity events on regulation courses in Wichita; Springfield, Mo.; and Kansas City.

On the day I met Jeremy at “Jeremy’s Creek Country Club,” he was dressed in colorful plus fours, like a miniature Payne Stewart, had a bag of clubs and an impressive swing. He carried the water on the fly, reached the green and stroked putts with confidence. When one dropped, he gave it the classic Tiger Woods fist pump.

As I watched Jeremy stalk a putt, it came to me: Though it was plastic, there was absolute nothing fake about this golf hole. 🏌️