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Course owner patents salt-tolerant grass

BY LYNDA LONG • SPECIAL TO NEWS-PRESS.COM • JULY 15, 2008

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Alden Pines Country Club - the only golf course on Pine Island - takes going green to another level.

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Owner Stewart Bennett has developed and patented several salt- and drought-tolerant turf grasses for his course. Golfers get the benefit of year-round greens and playing surfaces that are nourished by brackish salt water from Pine Island Sound, and they play rounds on a distinctively natural course. The grass is built to withstand harsh conditions such as tropical storms, heat and humidity, dry spells and flooding.

"I'm really in the agronomic business," Bennett said. "I've been working with these special grasses now and for the past 15 years, and they have proven very successful. The roots of these grasses can go as deep as 4 feet or more," he said.

Bennett, 45, and his business partner Tom Roberson, who lives in Bradenton, bought Alden Pines in Bokeelia about 16 years ago. Bennett has been in the golf course business since he was 17. His father owned a course in nearby Nokomis, and his family comes from the farming region of upstate New York.

The primary salt-tolerant grass at Alden Pines is paspalum. The three Bennett has patented and added to the mix are called SeaGreen, SeaWay and SeaDwarf. He travels the world consulting other courses about his grass.

"It really started by accident," he said. "I got a call about how to take care of the grasses in harsh conditions, and while I was explaining how to do it, they asked if I could come out to their course to help."

He's traveled to the Caribbean, the Bahamas and as far away as Hawaii and Portugal. His golf course consulting business is called SaltScape Solutions and his sea grasses can be found at www.paspalumgrass.com.

The course weaves between Alden Pines homes and has some unusual personality traits. Bordered by a 160-acre tract of mangrove forest, the front nine lakes rise and fall with the tides.

Bokeelia resident Ed Snyder, a member since 1983, plays there year-round.



Stewart Bennett at Alden Pines Country Club in Bokeelia. Bennett has developed and patented several salt- and drought-tolerant grasses for the course. (Lynda Long/special to news-press.com)

IF YOU GO

- What: Alden Pines Golf Club/SaltScape Solutions LLC
- Where: 14261 Clubhouse Drive, Bokeelia, FL 33922
- Phone: 283-3766
- Fax: 283-8430
- Web: www.paspalumgrass.com
- Email: saltscape@embarqmail.com

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"It's a short course and the fairways are very narrow," Snyder said. "If you don't hit the ball straight, you're looking for it. Right now it's in the best condition it's ever been. The greens are beautiful, and they keep the course in good shape."

The course is open from 6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. during the summer. Rates are \$22, including a golf cart, a hot dog and a drink. Fees range from \$25 to \$35 from November to April, depending on the month and time of day.

"We try to keep the prices affordable," Bennett said. "Most places charge much more than we do. We are the only course on the island. We want to be a resource for members and customers who have fixed incomes."

A snack bar is on site that serves hot dogs, kielbasa and bratwursts in the summer and sandwiches and breakfast during season.

"We also offer a full bar with alcohol, wine and beer," said Carol Wright, who works at the snack bar. Wright also helps with the small pro shop that sells gloves, hats, tees and golf balls.

As for tips on playing the Alden Pines course, Bennett offers a quick one: "Leave your driver in the trunk." His take on the most popular hole? "Probably No. 13. It's a par 5, very narrow and very long. It's tough," he said.


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