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ON-COURSE MANAGEMENT

New grass at Pine Lakes will be of major interest to other area courses

TRENT BOUTS

Golfers and students of the game's history are not the only ones eagerly awaiting the reopening of Pine Lakes International Country Club in Myrtle Beach. Golf course superintendents too are keen to see how the course, known as the Granddaddy, performs after an extensive renovation.

The specific interest is less about shot values than it is in the performance of an emerging salt and drought tolerant grass called SeaDwarf seashore paspalum.

When Pine Lakes reopens - which is currently scheduled for March of next year - it will be the only course on the Grand Strand and the furthest north along the Atlantic Coast growing paspalum wall-to-wall.

Sprigs will arrive next month to begin the planting process on greens, tees, fairways and rough areas. The only distinction between those areas will be how densely the sprigs are planted.

Tees will receive about 30 percent more sprigs than fairways, and greens will receive about 60 percent more. Then it will come down to mowing heights to draw the lines. Roughs can grow up to several inches, although 1 is recommended, while greens can be mowed as low as 1/10th of an inch.

"We are excited about this grass for several reasons," Pine Lakes certified golf course superintendent Alan Jarvis said. "But its ability to withstand drought and water with a high salt content is big."

Severe droughts in 2001 and again last year created serious issues for golf course superintendents in the Myrtle Beach area. Lack of rain to provide natural irrigation and replenish ponds was only part of the problem.

The drought also led to significant salt intrusion into waterways and wells. Without adequate flushing and access to freshwater, the Grand Strand's predominant Bermuda grass suffered from the build up of salts in the soil.

Jarvis has seen first hand how the paspalum can withstand thirsty periods. To familiarize himself with the needs and character of the grass, he grew it in trial plots at Pine Lakes over the past several years.

When irrigation was cut off to prepare for the renovation, the Bermuda grass died out in the ensuing drought while the paspalum plots "stayed green a long time," Jarvis said. "Its water needs are about 25 percent less than Bermuda grass."

Water savings of that magnitude could be a boon for courses and communities in times of drought. Grass supplier Modern Turf, based in Rembert, says paspalum's ability to handle lesser quality water in smaller amounts coupled with lower nitrogen needs "makes it the most environmentally friendly turfgrass available today."

The reduced water requirement at Pine Lakes is a significant part of the overall vision crafted by architect Craig Schreiner. Schreiner is creating a layout that will capture and store a majority of storm water, allowing it to be recycled directly back onto the golf course.

If all the above constitutes the kind of turf personality a superintendent would be attracted to, Jarvis found SeaDwarf has the looks to match. In addition to attending multiple seminars and work on his own research plots, Jarvis visited several courses in Florida covered by the grass.

"Once we took a look at it across a golf course and realized how beautiful it was, there wasn't really any question," he said. "It is much greener than Bermuda grass. It really looks great."


United States Golf Association Green Section agronomists Pat O'Brien and Chris Hartwiger agree. They visited

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two courses with wall-to-wall SeaDwarf paspalum in winter and wrote "these facilities definitely have the "wow" factor."

Pine Lakes opened as Ocean Forest Country Club in 1927 as the first course in Myrtle Beach, giving rise to the nickname of the Granddaddy.

TRENT BOUTS edits Carolinas Green magazine for the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents Association and consulted with members of the Palmetto Golf Course Superintendents Association for this column. He writes a monthly column for The Sun News.

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