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SPORTS

Thursday, Mar. 12, 2009

Pine Lakes Country Club golf course is back

Strong turfgrass part of makeover for Myrtle Beach mainstay

By Alan Blondin – ablondin@thesunnews.com

The future of Myrtle Beach golf has arrived, and it can be found on the area's oldest course.

Pine Lakes Country Club, built in 1927, is reopening to public play Saturday following a two-year renovation project and features a revolutionary SeaDwarf Paspalum grass throughout the layout.

Paspalum, which has a handful of variations and is believed to have been introduced to the southeastern U.S. coast as excess cargo off slave ships, is a hardy turfgrass that can be irrigated with brackish water. Pine Lakes is the first area course to use it extensively.



A worker mows around a pond on the old 4th fairway at the Pine Lakes Country Club. It is now the 15th with a new waste area. TOM MURRAY tmurray@thesunnews.com


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"They're exciting grasses and really allow us to do a lot of things in golf we were not able to do before they were available," said Paul Raymer, a Paspalum breeder and University of Georgia professor in the department of crop and soil sciences. "They let us go to some beautiful venues we could not have gone before because of the salt tolerance. It's not only an environmentally-friendly solution to sites with salt issues, but it's a beautiful solution. It's just sheer beauty if it's properly managed."

Pine Lakes is the first known course in South Carolina to go wall-to-wall with the grass on tees, fairways, greens and rough, and is the northernmost course on the East Coast to use it comprehensively.

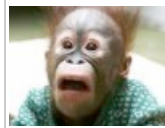
It has become prevalent in Florida over the past decade and a few S.C. courses feature it. May River Golf Club in Bluffton has Paspalum on tees and fairways, while the

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Ocean Course at Kiawan Island has had the Seal's Supreme version on tees and greens since 2002-03.

It's especially attractive to coastal courses because of its tolerance to salt and minimal watering. Grand Strand courses have either Bermudagrass or bentgrass on greens – other than winter overseeds – and many have struggled to keep grass healthy because of water quality, particularly in times of drought.

"If I had to build a golf course on any coastal area, I would use Paspalum," said Ocean Course superintendent Jeff Stone.

"I'm sold on it. There's not a grass out there

that will survive in these coastal conditions as well as Paspalum will, and nothing beats it surviving [golfer] traffic."

Like Bermudagrass, which is on every other public Grand Strand fairway and most greens, Paspalum is a warm-season grass that goes dormant and turns brown in South Carolina's winter months. So course operators have to overseed with Ryegrass on fairways and Poa trivialis on greens to remain green, though only for a few months. Pine Lakes' Paspalum is quickly gaining its color.

"It stays green longer than Bermudagrass and will green up quicker after it's gone dormant than Bermudagrass," Stone said. "We'll see it hold its color into late December and early January and green back up by mid to late March. ... There's not a better grass to overseed. You have zero transition issues."

Paspalum has a vibrant green color that can be striped when cut, and it develops a deeper and more extensive root system than Bermuda.

"It grew in a lot faster than we anticipated and than we were told it would," Pine Lakes Superintendent Alan Jarvis said. "The color and density going into the winter were just wonderful. So far we're impressed with it and like it. I can't wait for this summer because I'm expecting great things from it based on what we saw last summer."

Paspalum is considered an eco-friendly turf because potable water is not needed, it requires little nitrogen-based fertilizer, and it requires fewer insecticides and herbicides since brackish water contributes to the killing of the weeds and assists in keeping worms away from the roots.

It generally requires more fungicide treatment than Bermuda, however, because it is more susceptible to a couple of fungi known as dollar spot and brown patch. It also requires more intensive maintenance to cultivate desired performance, primarily on greens.

Raymer said it doesn't perform quite as well on greens as new Bermuda ultradwarfs that have become popular on the Strand such as Mini-Verde, Champions and TifEagle. But it is very close and can be cut lower to produce faster green speeds. "I've mowed this stuff a lot lower than I've ever mowed Bermudagrass," Stone said.

All of the Paspalum varieties available to courses have been found growing naturally. SeaDwarf was growing at Alden Pines Golf Club in Bokeelia, Fla., essentially as a weed. When interest grew, samples were collected and evaluated as a possible turfgrass.

It is believed the grass was used to line floors of slave ships and was discarded on the shore before the boats returned to Africa. It then adapted to the coastal conditions and has been found on the ocean sand dunes near known slave ports between Charleston and Jacksonville, Fla. "So if that's not the case it's certainly a coincidence," Raymer said.

Paspalum has been on courses in Hawaii for several years, including Turtle Bay Resort, site of a Champions Tour event, and is also scattered throughout the Caribbean and South America.

A Paspalum hybrid designed specifically for golf courses through cross-breeding in labs may be available by 2010, Raymer said.

A couple of other Strand courses have dabbled with Paspalum. It was installed in 2003 on the heavily shaded 13th tee box at River Hills Golf & Country Club and has flourished, and Rivers

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Pine Lakes Country Club golf course is back

Edge Golf Club superintendent John Shaver said he believes the course will change its greens to Paspalum this summer after monitoring the grass on its practice putting green since last summer.

"I'm interested to see the reviews on the greens at Pine Lakes," Shaver said.

He's not alone.

Contact ALAN BLONDIN at 626-0284.

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michael wrote on March, 12 3:09 PM:

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