

Hammock Bay Spreads Its Wings

The Grand Opening arrives!

by Stacie Zinn & Rich Redles

This article marks the eighth and final installment of our series on the development of Hammock Bay Golf & Country Club near Marco Island, Fla.

The journey took two full years as we witnessed the demise of the former Marco Shores Country Club and the birth of Hammock Bay. Along the way, there were changes to the landscape and changes in staffing innovations in greens construction, and the first-ever tee-to-green use of SeaDwarf, a cultivar of seashore paspalum.

We also watched as golf course designers Peter Jacobsen and Jim Hardy, along with developer WCI Communities, went from rough sketches to playable greens, and as superintendent Rodney Whisman sweated and strained to get the course ready for opening day.

It's been fun, informative, and, in a way, we're sorry to see it end. So join us now as we look back at where we've been, and forge ahead knowing the effort has been worthwhile.

January 12, 2004

WCI sent an e-mail announcing that they would be hosting soft opening events through the month of January with a February 13 grand opening planned.

January 23, 2004

WCI Communities invited reporters and golf members to take a helicopter tour of the nearly grown-in golf course. The aerial tour showed a consistent carpet of bright green SeaDwarf seashore paspalum turfgrass on all but the fifth hole, the youngest fairway and green on the course.

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An aerial shot of hole 3 taken on January 23 at Hammock Bay shows how well it, one of the first holes sprigged with SeaDwarf seashore paspalum, has grown in.



PHOTOS BY RICH REDLES.

Hammock Bay

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Also on this day, Superintendent Rodney Whisman and his staff moved into the new maintenance facility. The entire campus of the maintenance facility measures 2.84 acres with a 9,000-square-foot main building; two buildings dedicated to fertilizers and chemicals, 900-square-feet each; and a 1,250-square-foot pump house.

January 24, 2004

The course officially opened for play.

January 28, 2004

WCI hosted a tournament for preferred vendors.

February 9-15, 2004

Slated to be the grand opening week of Hammock Bay, WCI officials realized that the Champions Tour ACE Group Classic golf tournament—which was played nearby in North Naples and won by Craig Stadler—would steal their thunder.

Plus, Hammock Bay golf course co-designer Peter Jacobsen had already committed to play in the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am in California. He tied for a 14th place finish.

Hammock Bay's Grand Opening was rescheduled.

March 3, 2004

Grand opening!

An aerial photo taken on January 23 at Hammock Bay shows the scale of the project, grassed exclusively with SeaDwarf seashore paspalum.



Golf course designers Peter Jacobsen and Jim Hardy, along with WCI team members, lean in for the ribbon cutting at the Grand Opening of Hammock Bay.

WCI officials and golf course designers Peter Jacobsen and Jim Hardy hosted an early morning press conference where they talked turf.

“This was our first experience with paspalum,” Hardy said, “and since then we’ve put it on one other golf course. We did a renovation of the oldest course in Texas, [the] Galveston Country Club.”

Scott Hamm, agronomist with WCI,

added, “the main reason we used it was because of the salt water that we are going to be using to irrigate the golf course. It is capable of taking the salt water. It is a dwarf grass. We use the same grass on the greens that we do on the tees and fairways. We’re mowing the tees at .200 of an inch. That’s phenomenal. When I first showed Peter the grass, he walked on it and said ‘it looks like bentgrass,’ which is a cool-season grass, and that’s very nice.

“I’m a bentgrass guy, growing up in the state of Oregon. I’ve never really been a big fan of Bermudagrass. So, for me, the experience that I’ve had with the paspalum is overwhelming. I think these are the finest fairways that I’ve ever played golf on. That includes Augusta National and any major championship I’ve played,” Jacobsen said. “I think these are the finest fairways you’re going to see, certainly in Florida. I think this is the best turf condition you’re going to find.”

The subject turned toward Jacobsen and Hardy’s regard for the superintendent in the design process.

“Another thing we wanted to do was leave Rodney and the WCI team a golf course that they can maintain at their budget level. The first thing that we do, and I can’t speak for other architects, we make sure that every walk-through that we have from a design standpoint, whether it’s a strategy plan or a construction plan, we want everybody on that team to be with us. We want to make sure that we all sign off on it because this is going to be WCI’s property. Our design, yes. But it’s a team effort. It’s not mine. It’s not Jim’s. It’s ours. So, we want to make sure that whether it’s the first tee complex or the first

green complex, everybody understands and agrees with what we're doing. That includes the superintendent," Jacobsen said.

Hardy agreed, and offered specifics on how they design a course to be superintendent-friendly.

"We try to keep all mowable slopes, try to avoid real sharp angles around greens, try to build bunkers big enough and accessible enough that you can get in there with equipment to maintain them instead of having to hand-maintain all of the bunkers. And, also, anywhere we have steep slopes, we use SandTrapper (a brand of bunker liner) on all of our bunker faces, which helps keep the sand up on the bunkers and keeps the contamination out," Hardy said.

Jacobsen couldn't help but throw in a little humor to drive home the point.

"You'll notice the tee boxes are not automobile-grand-opening-looking platforms with a lot of flowers and pink volcanoes, pink flamingos, smoking volcanoes and hanging boulders off trees. They're pretty much on grade. A lot of times they're squares. It's a traditional teeing ground. And, again, it's something that you can maintain very easily, and it's traditional in nature. It may not be exciting for the photographers and you

An aerial photo taken on January 23 shows the new 6th hole at Hammock Bay, formerly the first hole at the old Marco Shores.



don't have the big deep shadows. But in our view, it's the way golf should be played and should be designed," Jacobsen said.

Hardy closed the conversation with this comment:

"A lot of times we'll forsake the look simply for that maintenance purpose. Rather than say no, no, stamp our foot, that's the look we want. This was really a collaborative effort with WCI's staff," Hardy said.

Apparently their attitude did not go unnoticed.

Ed D'Alessandro, vice president of the WCI amenities division, addressed the crowd.

"This is the first collaboration with the Jacobsen/Hardy design team, and I'm very confident it won't be the last based on what I've seen down here," D'Alessandro said.

Following the press conference, reporters, club members and guests watched as Jacobsen, Hardy and several members of the WCI team used an oversized pair of scissors to cut a red ribbon christening the new golf course.

Standing on the driving range, Superintendent Rodney Whisman reflected on the condition of the course.

"It's wonderful to maintain. The SeaDwarf is very easy to take care of because you don't have to mow it. I mean, most of the mowing that we do is for aesthetics right now, striping the place up. With the coolness and soil temperatures down, the SeaDwarf just doesn't grow. So, when we go out and mow, except for the greens, a lot of it's for esthetic purposes. We mow greens every day. Fairways, twice a week. Roughs, we hadn't mowed them since the end of November, and we just went out Monday and just kind of touched everything up a little bit. Did it need it? No."

Whisman also confirmed the turf's drought tolerance.

"It doesn't use [hardly] any water. With the rains that we had in February, we only had to water it twice all month with irrigation. That's amazing," he said.

Now that the course is grown in and open, how will his daily life change as a superintendent?

"We're hot and heavy now on Audubon stuff. We've got a lot of paperwork to fill out and just a lot of different stuff we've got to do for them," Whisman said. "Maybe six months from when we open, we'll be shooting for getting our Audubon Gold Signature Certification. That's my next big task at hand."

A few hours after the opening day tournament, Whisman's assistant superintendent, Jeff Price, reported on the day's playing conditions.

"The greens were double cut and rolled for the tournament this morning and just after that they were a solid 10.5 on the stimp meter. We irrigated this morning so they were a little wet at 10.5," Price said. "As the day wore on, when the sun came out, and the wind kicked up a little bit and dried up the greens, by this afternoon I'd say they were at least at 11."

Post-tournament, Whisman was beaming.

"Everybody was ranting and raving about the paspalum greens. I mean, they couldn't get over it. Nobody thought that they were going to putt this good. Nobody. Peter Jacobsen came up to me and said, 'You know what, this turf has some of the best playing conditions that I've played in a couple years.' That makes you feel good."

That evening Jacobsen addressed the crowd at a cocktail party reception.

"Marco Shores was such a fabulous golf course, and I remember when we did our opening under the tent, I remember a lot of the members and homeowners were really frustrated that this golf course that they loved was going to be taken away and destroyed," Jacobsen said. "We assured them that we were going to give them something equal to or possibly better than they had. And I think we've delivered that."