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Pine Lakes Country Club has been setting standards in and around Myrtle Beach for more than 80 years.

The Robert White design that opened in 1927 and recently was reworked by architect Craig Schreiner is reported to be the first golf course along the Grand Strand. Despite its age, the course nicknamed "The Granddaddy" has been a trendsetter in the Carolinas since its inception. Not only is it "the birthplace" of golf on the Grand Strand, it also is home to the Myrtle Beach Golf Hall of Fame and is where the concept for Sports Illustrated was hatched by Time Life executives in 1954.

Closed in 2007 and 2008 for Schreiner's from-the-ground-up renovation, the Granddaddy reopened in March as the first course in the area to convert wall to wall to seashore paspalum, a warm-season grass that thrives on poor-quality irrigation water. The project included reshaping the course, rerouting several holes and replacing Bermudagrass throughout the layout (328 greens and a plethora of varieties elsewhere) with Environmental Turf's SeaDwarf paspalum on greens, tees, fairways and roughs.



Randy Allen, CGCS, senior director of golf and grounds maintenance for Burroughs and Chapin Co., which has owned Pine Lakes since 2001, said choosing a grass for the renovation was not a decision that was taken lightly. By many accounts, only about a half-dozen courses in South Carolina currently use paspalum to any great extent.

"There is not a lot of history in Myrtle Beach," said Randy Allen, senior director of golf and grounds maintenance for Burroughs and Chapin Co., which has owned Pine Lakes since 2001. "It's basically been torn down and rebuilt and what-not. We were very conscious to try to preserve what little bit we had here and maintain as good a product as we possibly could.

"When the club opened up, we tried to create another piece of history for Myrtle Beach. We feel like we've got four big pieces – the birthplace of golf, the birthplace of Sports Illustrated, the Myrtle Beach Golf Hall of Fame and now the first extensive use of paspalum in this area."

A group of about 90 golf course superintendents, assistants, university researchers, vendors and others were on hand at Pine Lakes on Sept. 9 to learn more about paspalum, view it up close and experience its playability factor firsthand during Perspectives on Paspalum, an educational seminar sponsored by Environmental Turf.

Topics included Pine Lakes' search-and-selection process, site preparation, management practices, disease and weed management, on irrigation water quality information and how to use plant growth regulators with paspalum.

Stewart Bennett, CGCS, has been growing paspalum for 17 years as a superintendent, owner and consultant with SaltScape Solutions.

Bennett reaffirmed to the group the importance of regular soil testing and managing paspalum by managing the sodium in the soil.

"People ask me all the time 'how salt-tolerant is paspalum?' " Bennett said. "I ask them 'how salt-tolerant is your soil?' Soil is the difference."

That message resonated with Drew Thomas, an assistant irrigation tech on Eric Greytok's crew at Belfair Plantation in Bluffton, S.C.

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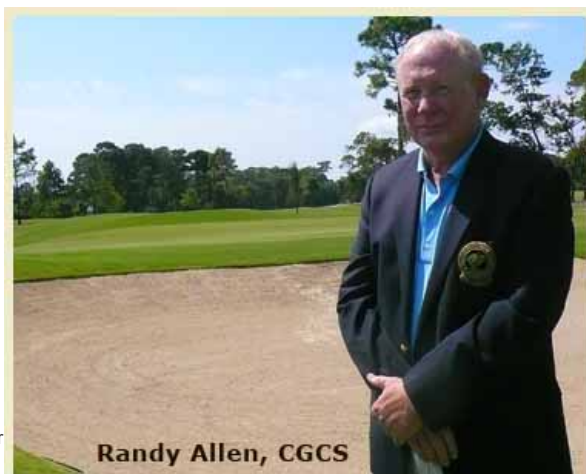
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"It just reiterated that your turf is only as good as your soil," Thomas said. "Your soil is only as good as what you put in it, and this was a good reminder. Everyone thinks that you can use everything, all these chemicals to help your turf, but you have focus on your soil."

Although an early adopter of paspalum, Allen had not given much thought to regrassing the new-look Pine Lakes with anything other than Bermudagrass.

"I thought that was about our only choice because of where we're located," Allen said.

Actually it was Allen's son, Lance, now superintendent at Woodfin Ridge Golf Club in Inman, S.C., who planted the seeds for paspalum with his father in 2006. At the time, the younger Allen had just accepted a job in Florida. He had grown fond of paspalum while working at May River Golf Club in Bluffton, which is grassed with the Sea Isle I variety.



Randy Allen, CGCS

Lance had asked his father, while the two were playing golf at Pine Lakes, what grass he would grow-in after the renovation.

"He told me 'if I ever have the chance again, I'm going to use paspalum,'" the elder Allen said.

Soon after, the elder Allen and Pine Lakes superintendent Alan Jarvis set out on a paspalum fact-finding mission. They visited the few courses in South Carolina that had it as well as some in Florida, including Tuscany Reserve in Naples.

Both immediately were impressed by the color and overall appearance of the SeaDwarf on the Pete Dye, Greg Norman design.

"It felt like the first time I went to Augusta (National Golf Club), that place was so pretty," Allen said.

Said Jarvis: "I thought 'If we do that and it comes out half as nice as (Tuscany Reserve) I'd be happy.' That was the nicest place I've ever seen."

When they began asking around about the grass it didn't take long for some of the feedback they received to have an impact.

Lou Conzelmann, now director of golf maintenance at Tiburon Golf Club in Naples, told Allen "it sells real estate it's so pretty."

"That one hit," Allen said.

USGA Green Section agronomist Todd Lowe informed Allen and Jarvis that of the 30 or so golf courses in Florida with paspalum, he didn't know of any superintendent who would go back to Bermudagrass if given the opportunity.

"Those two comments really stuck with me," Allen said. "And after the visit that night to Tuscany Reserve both Alan and I went from comfortable to excited about using paspalum."

After the pair sold the idea to Bob Swezey, vice president of Burroughs and Chapin's golf and resorts division, Jarvis established test plots of Sea Isle Supreme and SeaDwarf as well as two plots with MiniVerde and TifDwarf Bermudagrass. Performance on the test plots helped him and Allen make their decision.

Spring 2006 was very dry in the Myrtle Beach area, and while Bermuda struggled under droughtlike conditions, the paspalum plots thrived.

"That was one of the reasons why ended up choosing SeaDwarf was because of the drought tolerance," Jarvis said.

Coming out of their first full year managing paspalum, Allen and Jarvis are confident they have made the right choice in grassing over a fabled track with paspalum.



Golfers have noticed as well. Although he couldn't site specific numbers, Allen said play has been up this year – in the face of increased green fees.

"I've had comments like 'is it real? It looks like plastic,'" Jarvis said.

"Someone said the other day it looked like fresh-laid carpet."



SeaDwarf is noted for its striking color and early spring green up, as well as its tolerance for drought, poor quality irrigation water. Sprigs also develop relatively quickly, a process that appeared to be accelerated at Pine Lakes.

"We'd been told all along not to expect a lot for the first six, seven, eight weeks; about the eight-week point it would really start to take off," Jarvis said. "We found it to be much quicker for us.

"We found it to really start to jump at about the four-week time frame. And it really took off at five weeks."

While golf courses here, Pine Lakes included, make their hay attracting well-heeled tourist golfers, the area also has proven to be susceptible to the industry's hard times. About two dozen courses have closed in the past several years, and those who remain in business continually are searching for an edge in the effort to attract golfers.

Both Allen and Jarvis view paspalum with its lush, green look as one such edge. But the funky palette of colors during dormancy is not an effective marketing tool.

Many courses throughout the transition zone and the rest of the southeast have gradually moved away from overseeding for a variety of reasons, including challenges with transition, price and availability of seed as well as cost and accessibility of water. But image is everything in Myrtle Beach. Although overseeding Bermudagrass is nothing new, particularly in this area, it borders on venturing into uncharted waters when mentioned in the same sentence with paspalum.

"I think a lot of eyes will be on us next spring to see how this turns out," Allen said.

Even those closest to paspalum say it has its limits – particularly concerning dormancy. Shades of yellow, brown, green and gray can be visible at the same time in the same stand.

"I think it looks horrible when it goes dormant," said Hank Kerfoot, president of Modern Turf of Rembert, S.C., who sold the sod to Pine Lakes. "If I were a superintendent growing it here, I'd oversee too."

The project was not without its challenges.



Site preparation alone was a painstaking process. Crews made three applications of Roundup mixed with Fusilade then tilled in two directions to a depth of 4 inches to eradicate the Bermuda population. After reshaping the course, which included raising or lowering some fairways by as much as 6-7 feet, the soil was fumigated with Basimid for nematode control.

Washouts also occurred during the grow-in. Dollar spot has been a recurrent issue during humid or foggy conditions, and learning how paspalum interacted with herbicides, some of which caused yellowing, was a new experience.

For example, Jarvis learned from a fellow superintendent that mixing SpeedZone with 2 ounces of water rather than 1 ounce can eliminate the yellowing problem he encountered when spraying to control nutsedge.

The conversion also has helped keep Pine Lakes equipment manager busy as the thicker, tougher blades associated with paspalum have been especially rough on mower cutting units.

“Make sure you have a good mechanic,” Jarvis said.

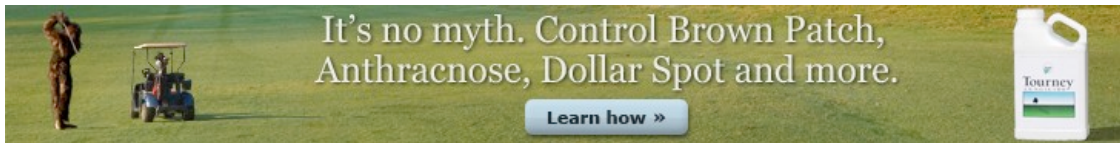
“Paspalum can be kind of tough on your mowers.

“We do daily adjustments and replace bedknives every two or three weeks to keep a sharp edge,” Jarvis said. “We’ve found that if you let your mowers get dull you tend to get some tearing of the leaves, and you can have disease come in on that. If we stay on Primo consistently that seems to help a lot.”

Preventive fungicide treatments for pythium and what looked like brown patch have been critical to Jarvis’ program.

“We never lost any grass, just some discoloration,” Jarvis said.

“Preventive fungicides are very important.”



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