

Got some swampland you want converted?

BY VERN PUTNEY

Buying swampland in Florida long has been a standing joke.

Felix C. Paguaga, now course superintendent at Boca Rio Golf Club in Boca Raton, Fla., in 1969 went one step farther in treacherous footing.

Paguaga left a comfortable post at the prestigious El Conquistador Hotel & Club in Farjardo, Puerto Rico, to take over "The Fountains Country Club" in Lake Worth.

The street address for the "golf course" was a vacant tomato farm, with empty fields and abandoned migrant housing units. The Fountains existed, if at all, strictly on paper or in the minds of developers.

When Paguaga in 1986 departed The Fountains for his current post, that complex had become 54 holes of exceptionally well-groomed holes, three challenging 18-hole layouts highlighted by a need for demanding shots over and around devilishly designed water pitfalls.

In addition, the complex seven miles south of West Palm Beach is a valuable piece of real estate. Member condominiums abound and in places block out spectacular course views.

Settled nicely at Boca Rio, in a "delightful" atmosphere featuring very special treatment by members in one of the best jobs in the Sunshine State, Paguaga now smiles at his shocking introduction to The (mythical?) Fountains.

After details were settled, Paguaga set about correcting on-site problems, hiring a crew, planning a location for the maintenance crew, etc.

The remainder of the year involved the problems of construction, planting, irrigation and growing-in period.

"Grand Opening" came in October 1970.

The second 27 holes was



Felix Paguaga gets ready to test one of the greens at Boca Rio.

completed during the 1972-73 recession under a second ownership. The property changed hands several times in the years ahead.

In 1971, Paguaga was asked to take on the care of the course at Dorado Hilton. He shuttled between Florida and Puerto Rico as courses supervisor until the Puerto Rico course was sold a year later.

Landscaping challenge

In the late 1970s, Paguaga was immersed in planning and planting of "landscaping" for the Fountains clubhouse, entryways and court yards for the residential units.

It was commonplace to find Paguaga at the sales office,

huddling with the staff to solve problems for a customer concerning a view or absence of view, some special treatment such as planting of trees, shrubs or flowers.

Sales personnel credited much of their spectacular success to the cooperation of Paguaga and his department.

In 1981-82 Paguaga was occupied with moving and transferring a "nursery" in order to build an additional 18 holes. The work was completed in 1983, and the next three years were as routine as shepherding 54 holes can be.

At this time, members bought out the developer's interest and took control of the club and operations.

SUPER FOCUS

Paguaga, invited in 1967 to be the first superintendent at Boca Rio, in August 1986 accepted the opportunity to work at that smaller club.

Boca Rio is in "beautiful shape" and recently was rated by "Golf Digest" as the No. 13 course in Florida. Designed by Robert Von Hagge, Boca Rio is considered a demanding but fair test.

Coincidentally, Von Hagge also designed the three Fountains courses.

Boca Rio has 150 members, is par 72 and measures 7,037 yards from the back tees. Jay Bechtold is the head pro.

Paguaga and Irma, his wife of 32 years, share a home provided by Boca Rio. Three grandchildren at times enliven the surroundings.

The Paguagas met while he was studying at the University of Florida in 1956. After he graduated with a bachelor's degree in agriculture, they married and returned to his native Republic of Honduras, where he became a government agronomist.

His job consisted of marketing, planning of conservation and storage for grains and cereals, and the pest control of those grains. He also was involved with planning a "Common Market for Central America."

A new beginning

Shortly after the birth of daughter Vicki, Irma confessed to homesickness. In late 1960, Paguaga sent wife and baby back to Florida and followed them six months later. (Other children are Rolando and Ricardo. Both are in military service.)

After many months of rejections, Paguaga was offered a job as golf course superintendent for a club in Delray Beach. He was hired the next morning by club owner Warren Grimes, returned to Gainesville and collected his family for the move to South Florida.

Although he knew little about the game or maintenance of a golf course, he felt he could grow strong and healthy grass. The course quickly responded to his care and treatment, and took on a new and green appearance.

Making many new friends among players and professionals, Paguaga was encouraged to learn to play golf. By learning everything he could about "golf" and by playing the course, Paguaga believed he could better understand and anticipate difficulties before they became "problems" or a major source of trouble.

About this time, Paguaga became friends with Dr. G.C. Horn of the University of Florida, prominent in the South Florida Turf Association, and Von Hagge. They were instrumental in his early career. Horn advised on technical

problems and Von Hagge contributed suggestions on learning to play with skill.

After Delray Beach CC was sold, Paguaga worked at the Royal Palm Yacht Club in Boca Raton until 1967. Von Hagge was designing a course in Farjardo and wanted Paguaga to undertake construction.

The course was located in the rolling and rock hills surrounding El Conquistador, overlooking the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean.

In many areas, the topsoil was barely one-eighth inch, covering solid rock underneath and an insufficient water supply.

Meeting the stars

However, the course was finished in time to host "Shell's Wonderful World of Golf." Chi Chi Rodriguez, Gay Brewer and Arnold Palmer were the featured performers.

El Conquistador was chosen because of its panoramic beauty, uniqueness and challenge.

Many show business stars and celebrities performing at the nearby El San Juan Hotel played El Conquistador. One attractive "perk" was, as "super" and a player, being tapped to complete a foursome.

While there, Paguaga met Robert Cloughen, a rising young professional from Danbury, Conn. They were reunited as pro and super at The Fountains in 1972.

Cloughen, now Fountains director of golf, termed Paguaga "a most talented man in the field of preventive course medicine. He detects potential difficulty early, and sprays when it is most effective."

Many changes have taken place in Paguaga's 27 years as superintendent. More responsibility and liability is placed on environmental protection, the use of pesticides and labor problems.

Today's superintendents walk a fine line in the balancing act. They are involved with public relations, budgeting matters and the need to communicate and instruct effectively.

Over the years, Paguaga has helped many aspiring course supers. He feels the best advice he can give is to echo Von Hagge's urging: Learn the game, try to play it well to understand the player viewpoint on course problems, and try to play portions of the course at least every other day.

It means first-hand observation, he says, and the manner in which problems can be recognized is uncanny. The next morning, the maintenance staff can be on top of the situation.

One thing as "super" hasn't changed: the long hours and dedication. Paguaga maintains that tradition.

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