

# SuperFocus

## Hoolehan sets out to prove bent can be grown in Hawaii

By HAL PHILLIPS

**K**ANEHOE, Oahu, Hawaii — Superintendent Sean Hoolehan looks after Koolau Golf Club, which sports the only bentgrass tees and greens on Oahu. He'd like to take credit, but he knows circumstances forced the move.

"The site dictated it completely," said Hoolehan, who was brought in during construction of this 3-year-old Dick

Nugent design. "It would have been impossible to maintain Bermudagrass greens on this site. It's not the temperature — It's the mountain range. We have a 3,000 foot vertical range backing right up to the golf course. By 2:30 each afternoon, the whole course is cast in shade.

"We also get such high rainfall, the Bermudagrass gets real spindly and the ground so spongy, we can't mow it," Hoolehan continued. "We get about 100 inches of rain annually. And because of the mountains, it varies radically all over the course. For instance, I get 80 to 90 inches on the third tee and 130 on the 15th tee, because it's closer to the mountains."

Koolau (pronounced Ko-oo-lau) is one of Hawaii's most interesting courses: In addition to the bentgrass greens and tees, it's a daily-fee facility in the land of upscale private and resort courses. Further, it boasts the highest slope rating, 162, in the United States (see related story).

How did Hoolehan end up here? It's a Chicago story...

Born and raised in Oak Park, Ill., Hoolehan discovered his love for agronomy while working for Bob Brame (now a Green Section agronomist) at Timber Trails in nearby La Grange. After completing Rutgers' two-year program in turf management, he returned to the Chicago area and took an assistant's job at Ruth Lake in Hinsdale.



Sean Hoolehan

"Sean was Ray Scheid's assistant at Ruth Lake," explained Tim Nugent, Dick's son, who takes up the story. "A while back, my dad did some renovation work out there and worked with Sean."

Meanwhile, the Koolau project was taking shape on Oahu. It was conceived in the late 1980s, when Japanese money was plentiful and the

appetite for Hawaiian real estate considerable. A noted Chicago-area designer, Dick Nugent was retained by Koolau's Japanese developer.

Just when the Nugents and design consultant Jack Tuthill were ready to begin construction, they bumped into Scheid's old assistant.

"Jack and Dad were at the Hawaiian Open and they ran into Sean," said Nugent. "My dad said: 'What are you doing here?'"

Turns out Hoolehan's wife, Kathy, was in the Navy and had been transferred to Pearl Harbor. Todd Nicely — then general manager and head pro at Navy Marine Golf Course — offered Hoolehan a job as night waterman and events accelerated.

"Within a year I was head superintendent," Hoolehan explained. "My expectation wasn't to be a superintendent out here right away. The culture was different. I had no experience with warm-season grasses. It was just one of those things. I was just looking for a job that would teach me how to grow Bermudagrass."

After their fateful meeting at the

Hawaiian Open, Dick Nugent hired Hoolehan as Koolau's first superintendent.

However, somewhere between the end of construction and the grow-in, the bottom fell out of the Japanese economy.

What had been conceived and built to be an upscale private course ("You should see the clubhouse," said Tim Nugent. "It's 100,00 square feet.") was opened as a daily-fee golf course — during a recession.

Hoolehan had some adjustments to make.

"The hardest thing has been working through this economic slump," he said. "During construction, we thought we'd maintain it with crew of 35 guys. We use 16 now. But you learn a lot from that — how to make do. You learn a lot more than you would with a blank check."

"Sean is the glue that has held the whole thing together," said Tim Nugent. "And the course just wouldn't be what it is without him. He was the only superintendent out there who said you could grow bent."

"He said: 'You plant it; I'll grow it.'"

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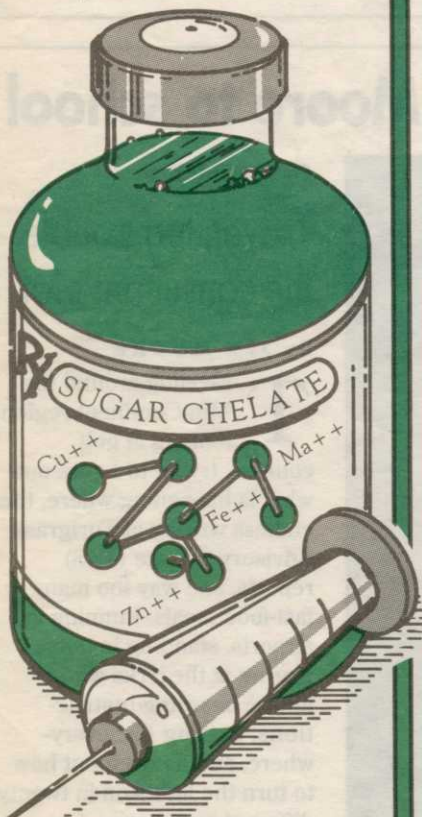
The agronomic transition from Chicago to Oahu wasn't easy for Hoolehan. In Chicago, you learn to be stingy with fertilizer, he said. On Oahu, year-round weed growth demands a heavy hand with fertilizer and a light touch with pesticides.

"The most challenging thing here is weed control because there is no off-season," he said. "All the annual weeds in Chicago are perennials in Hawaii. Weed control is the measure of any good

Continued on next page

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## Koolau altitudinal in more ways than one, USGA finds

By HAL PHILLIPS

KANEHOE, Oahu, Hawaii — Move over, Pine Valley; make way for the new slope king.

That's right, Koolau Golf Club has unseated the King Kong of Clementon as America's most ornery golf course. The Dick Nugent design topped out at a near-Satanic 162 on the United States Golf Association slope meter, though the official USGA limit is 155.

"The developer wanted the longest course in Hawaii," said Tim Nugent, Dick's son. "So that's what we gave him. It's 7,300 yards from the back."

"It's off the charts," said superintendent Sean Hoolehan, who has been on board since construction began. "But I honestly think you could not have built this course, on this site — and still be environmentally conscientious — without making it this hard."

"Dick [Nugent] said: 'I'm not going to move all that dirt just to make it easier.'"

Koolau's original rating was 152, as determined by the Hawaii State Golf Association. But the greens had so many different target points, the course was resloped. The rating jumped to 158.



Koolau's 1st hole gives golfers an indication of the "highly sloped" challenge ahead. The Oahu island course has the highest slope in the United States — supplanting Pine Valley as king.

Dean Knuth, the USGA's senior director of handicapping, didn't believe Koolau could be so high, so he decided to slope the course himself. Knuth was right — the course had been misjudged.

Knuth rated it 162 from the back, 158 from the blues.

"Before I played it, I was somewhat dubious," said Knuth, who developed the slope system and personally sloped Pine Valley at 153. "I mean, how could that course possibly have such a high slope rating? Not only was it not too high, I discovered they were being too conservative... Basically there are no bail-outs and you have forced carries

over jungle, where a ball can neither be found nor played."

Why does the USGA stop at 155?

"It's a linear system," Knuth explained. "If the slope is allowed to go too high, it becomes non-linear and skews handicaps."

Consequently, the Koolau scorecard reads: Gold tees — 155\*; blue tees — 155\*; white tees — 154.

The asterisk tells the true story, if you have the stomach for it.

"It's a ball-eater, that's for sure," said Hoolehan. "You've got to keep it in play. But it's really not that bad. It's hard, but it's fair."