

SuperFocus

Hoolehan sets out to prove bent can be grown in Hawaii

By HAL PHILLIPS

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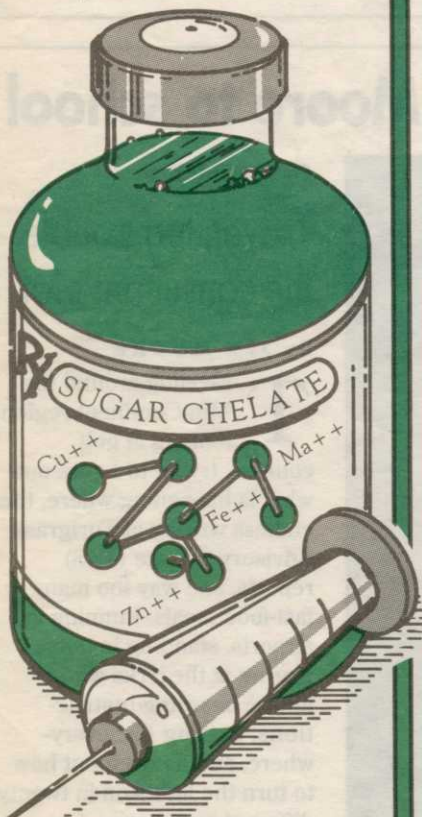
The agronomic transition from Chicago to Oahu wasn't easy for Hoolehan. In Chicago, you learn to be stingy with fertilizer, he said. On Oahu, year-round weed growth demands a heavy hand with fertilizer and a light touch with pesticides.

"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

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Koolau altitudinal in more ways than one, USGA finds

By HAL PHILLIPS

KANEEOHE, 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."

Penn State's Hamilton develops new mulch 'crucial to turf seedbeds'

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences has developed a new mulch for landscapers and turfgrass professionals.

Pennmulch (patent pending), developed by agronomy instructor George Hamilton, is made from chopped newsprint, magazines and other paper, and can be used in place of traditional mulching materials.

In addition to creating a use for large volumes of wastepaper, the product addresses a long-standing need in the industry.

"Mulching is crucial in turfgrass seedbeds for holding moisture, reducing erosion and protecting seeds from temperature extremes," said Hamilton. "But traditional mulches present problems. Many professionals use hydromulch — a mixture of wood fiber or ground paper combined with fertilizer and seed, which is sprayed onto seedbeds. Hydromulching requires an expensive machine and a high-volume water source for filling the hydromulcher.

"The alternative is straw, which often contains weed seeds, tends to blow away, and is difficult to store and handle. In addition, soil microorganisms that break down straw also deplete soil nitrogen."

Pennmulch is shaped into small, green pellets that are easy to ship and store. "It looks exactly like rabbit food," Hamilton said. "The pellets can be spread by hand or by many types of conventional spreaders owned by turfgrass

professionals and landscapers. A starter fertilizer can be combined with the product so that fertilizing and mulching is done in one step."

When wet, the pellets expand to several times their original size so that a small amount covers a large area. Also, because the mulch is made entirely of paper, there's no danger of seedbeds being contaminated by weed seeds, he said.

While Pennmulch currently is marketed only to commercial

operations, Hamilton hopes to make it available to homeowners soon. "The product has a large marketing potential," he said. A Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture survey shows that in 1989 homeowners spent nearly \$19 million on grass seed.

"Pennmulch has great possibilities for retail because it can be sold in any size bag, it is shipped and stored much more easily than traditional mulches and the shelf life is unlimited," he

said. "Although it was designed for use in grass seedbeds, we're looking into other uses, such as vegetable gardens and ornamental plantings."

Research on the product began three years ago with a Ben Franklin Partnership Environmental Technology Fund, which included in-kind support from the College of Agricultural Sciences.

Pennmulch is being manufactured by Penn Mulch, Inc., of

Pittsburgh. Last fall, 50 tons were produced and about 40 tons were sold to turfgrass and landscape companies.

"We're researching new sources of paper, development of a low-cost pneumatic spreader to apply the mulch, and variations of the product containing fertilizer and grass seed," Hamilton said. "We're also implementing an extensive marketing plan. I'm confident Pennmulch will establish a niche in the industry."

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Koolau's Hoolehan

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superintendent in Hawaii.

"The bentgrass usually survives all year long, but we make no effort to keep it. We use no herbicides. We have a real strict IPM (integrated pest management) program here. Depending on the time of year, we want to see the disease before we spray. We have an IPM manager whose sole job is to be on top of disease

"We just can't justify the use of fungicides. We get hammered by dollar spot this time of year, and Bermuda merges about this time, too. But we just let it go."

Though Koolau sports bentgrass tees and greens, the fairways are overseeded with Bermuda during the winter season.

It's ironic that Hoolehan traveled to Hawaii and spent all that time learning to deal with warm-season grasses, only to look after a course with wall-to-wall bent, save the fairways a few months each winter.

"It's sort of ridiculous," he said with a laugh. "But you know what else I learned out here? It's hard to kill Bermudagrass."