

# how sweet it is

In Michigan's Upper Peninsula, golfers might find themselves examining their concept of normal.

In Harris, Mich., the Hannahville Band of the Potawatomi Nation is building a new golf course as part of the "natural evolution" of its 22-year-old Island Resort & Casino. That's normal for casino resorts nowadays, but that might be where the comparisons end – designwise, constructionwise and financewise.

Through a fortune willed to the tribe by an outsider, Sweetgrass Golf Club is being built without borrowing any money, according to Tony Mancilla, council chairman of the Hannahville Indian Community. As important as that is, and as much as Mancilla promises they will hold the line on the cost of a round of golf, it's only one of the project's facets that sets it apart from the norm.

Normally, an architect won't identify any one of his creations as his best. But, Paul Albanese of Plymouth, Mich., says this is by far the best golf course he has designed.

Typically, courses in the U.P. consist of about 150 acres and are heavily forested, commanding golfers to be precise with their drives. But Sweetgrass consists of 320 acres of mostly open farm fields and mildly undulating hills, with only a handful of holes meandering through trees. Because of this, Albanese was able to create a layout that makes it difficult to lose balls when playing.

Normally, views of lakes or mountains outside a course are a drawing card. At Sweetgrass, the best views are the features the development team created, such as an island green and the waterfalls between the ninth and 18th greens, Albanese says.

Typically, 100-year-old, one-car iron bridges dot the highways of Michigan. At Sweetgrass, five of them will carry golf cars to the island green or over wetlands and creeks.

At Sweetgrass, native lore is written on scorecards and stretches out before the golfer on every hole, such as the fifth, which tells the legend of the serpent and the great flood, and the 18th, which depicts the story of the seven grandfathers.

Generally, those in the industry can make three educated guesses to determine the type of irrigation system installed on a new golf course. At Sweetgrass, the first-ever John Deere-manufactured Aurora Decoder System was installed.

Normally, if a golf facility contains a continuous flame, it's in the grill. At Sweetgrass, a flame is kept burning constantly in a firepot on the 10th tee box to mark the fact that the Hannahville Band of the Potawatomi Nation are known as keepers of the fire.

The golf course, which has been grassed, is expected to open in July.

#### CONTINUED GROWTH

Even though the golf course was a natural evolu-

tion for the resort, the tribe conducted a market study for the \$4-million to \$5-million project, Mancilla says.

"We did it for the bank and so the tribal council would feel comfortable," he says. "One of the studies said a golf course would be a big draw if done well, and that's what we intended. In every one of the market studies for previous expansions, we've always exceeded expectations."

The estate was left to the tribe by Zoe Bra-zowski, who had visited the reservation when she was a young girl in the 1930s, so the Hannahville Band was able to self-finance the golf course, Mancilla says. Since the casino opened in a pole barn in 1985, the tribe has managed the entire operation, overseeing construction of a small casino with 40 slot machines and 28 guestrooms in 1991; the addition of a convention center, 113 guestrooms and 860 slots in 1997; and the addition of 225 guestrooms and another 600 slots this year. Currently, the resort features 330 guestrooms, 1,500 slots and a convention center that holds about 400 people.

The tribe was confident it could build the golf course on its own, Mancilla says. The tribe used its own construction company moved the bulk of the dirt for the golf course, saving half the cost of such a job.

#### ROCK WORK

Aside from the heavy earth-moving, Grassi Enterprises of Howell, Mich., handled the construc-



# Native American tribe differentiates its new course from others in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

BY MARK LESLIE



The \$4- to \$5-million Sweetgrass Golf Club was built without borrowing any money, according to the council chairman of the Hannahville Indian Community. Photo: EPIC Creative



tion, including one project that owner Dan Grassi says he'll never do again – chiseling about 10 feet of ledge rock to create a waterfall and 10-acre water feature. Afraid of using dynamite because it could cause fissures in the ledge rock leading to leaks in the ponds, Grassi and partner Dana Morrow used excavators with three jackhammers to do the job, which took two months. Grassi and Morrow used the rock from the excavation to create 200 feet of waterfalls that cascade down from the double-green at the ninth and 18th holes and between the two fairways and settle in three ponds along the way. From there, the water flows into a creek that runs through the golf course.

#### BETTER DIRT

The other considerable challenge for Grassi was compensating for the heavy clay soils throughout much of the property. While creating mounding, bunkers and other features, Grassi also was able to use the clay to line the several ponds that were built. But still, they needed to cap the clay with soil on which a golf course could be built. Albanese's design called for all-sand California greens, and the tees needed to be sandcapped before they could be laser-leveled to promote drainage. When a 10-acre parking lot was built, Grassi used the soil from that project to build features and elevate greens and tees. Another soil source was the earth around about 30 acres of trees that were logged.

"We weren't allowed to burn," Grassi says. "A

logger did the logging, and we did the stumping. Then we took an excavator and shook out the topsoil and loaded it into trucks to a pit for later use."

The stumps were used as fill.

#### NEW PLUMBING

Meanwhile, Grassi chose to be the first to install John Deere's new Aurora Decoder irrigation system, a two-wire system that includes more than 1,000 irrigation heads and almost 22 miles of pipe.

"Installation went 30-percent to 40-percent faster than a conventional irrigation system because you use fewer wires," Grassi says. "Typically, you irrigate a hole every couple days. We were able to get it down to a day, day and a half per hole. You use a lot less copper and run a lot less wire."

With the two-wire system, golf course superintendent John Holberton has individual head control, is able to operate it from a cell phone or computer, and, if he wants to add a head, can just run a piece of pipe and connect the wire to one of the nearest heads, not all the way back to the controller. That's good because Holberton, who joined the project in July 2006 after the irrigation choice was made, is adding more heads and might exceed more than 1,100 by the time he's done.

"Seeding lines exceeded irrigation," he says. "The wind blows every day, sometimes so hard that you only get water in one direction."



### AT A GLANCE Sweetgrass Golf Club

**Location:** Harris, Mich.  
**Type of project:** New construction  
**Cost:** Between \$4 million and \$5 million  
**Construction start:** August 2005  
**Construction end:** October 2007  
**Course opening:** July 2008  
**Owner:** Hannahville Indian Community  
**Architect:** Paul Albanese  
**Builder:** Grassi Enterprises  
**Superintendent:** John Holberton  
**Turfgrass:** L-93 bentgrass on the greens and fairways; a mix of L-93 and Southshore on the tees; hard and sheep fescues in rough

#### A COURSE APART

Meanwhile, Albanese has been busy creating a course he believes will be different than any other in the Upper Peninsula.

"We tried to minimize forced carries and make it exceptionally playable because there will be a lot of high-handicap golfers; yet, you could have a PGA Tour event here from the back tees without question," he says. "We tried to create a golf course where you can have as much risk-and-reward challenge as you want. From the back tees, if you take the risky route, you can run into quite a bit of penalty. But if you deal with it effectively, if you get over the correct bunkers at the right spot, you will be amply rewarded. But all day long, you can bail out and make bogey; you're not going to make double-bogey. That's the essence of a good design. You won't be overly penalized."

Mancilla, an avid golfer, agrees Sweetgrass is a special golf course.

"It's different than anything you will see in this area," he says. "People are used to tree-lined courses in the Upper Peninsula. The difficulty is getting down the fairway and keeping your ball in play. That's not the case here. A lot of the Upper Peninsula courses aren't that long. You're never hitting over a 7-iron into a par-4. Here, you will play every club in your bag, and that sets it apart for me."

Sweetgrass is the first course to feature John Deere's new Aurora Decoder irrigation system. Photo: EPIC Creative



“As a golf course contractor, you always feel one or two holes were left out, but the land here was so aesthetically pleasing and with Paul’s routing, we’ve got 18 great ones,” says Grassi, who has built a couple dozen courses during the past 26 years. “It seems that on every hole you’re on your own private hole.”

Aside from a sound design strategy, Albanese wanted to incorporate another aspect that would create interest beyond golf – something unique to the tribe and the Potawatomi Nation.

“We wanted to reflect native culture and tribal heritage, so we started to look at the native stories and legends as a way that we could incorporate them into the design,” he says. “We wanted the overall earth-moving and grading to blend in to what was already there. It doesn’t look artificial, out of place or over the top. When you look at that bunkering, you think, ‘Wow! That’s visually dynamic.’ But there’s a story behind it, a genesis that comes from a tribal legend or story.”

On some holes, seeing the legend is like discerning an animal in the clouds, such as the Sacred Deer hole where a gigantic waste bunker across the fairway resembles a deer. On the Serpent and the Great Flood hole, a serpentine bunker curls down to the edge of a two-acre pond that represents the flood. Seven pot bunkers symbolize the seven grandfathers in another legend. Redan means fortress or fort in French, so Albanese designed a Redan-style green on the

Michigami (Native American for “fort”) hole.

#### OVER THE WATER

More visible to everyone will be the bridges. Tribal administrator Pat Groleau discovered the Michigan Department of Transportation was selling a historic one-car bridge for scrap metal. It happened that Albanese and Grassi were discussing the island green on the 15th hole, and a typical land bridge was planned because they didn’t want to build a bridge. A cost analysis led to experimenting with a 104-foot-long iron bridge built in 1915. The bridge was disassembled, moved to the property, restored and reassembled at the island green. It looked so good, the Hannahville Indian Community bought four more, Mancilla says. The shortest is 50-feet long, and they all match, partly because they were built within 10 years of each other.

“It took a little more time and money than we anticipated, but those bridges have added a lot to the course,” Mancilla says.

#### FRESH GRASS

Holberton, a Class A superintendent who came to Sweetgrass from Wild Bluff Golf Club in Brimley, Mich., has overseen a difficult grow-in period. Intense heat and only two-tenths of an inch of rain during 2.5 months caused concern and a lot of extra watering – so much so that Holberton had to make fungicide applications

to halt diseases. But now the rains have fallen, his crews are mowing all but two fairways, and the opening is in sight.

L-93 bentgrass was chosen for the greens and fairways, while a mix of L-93 and Southshore was used on the tees. A large area of bluegrass stands between the fairways and secondary rough, where hard and sheep fescues will create a wispy, Scottish look. And the sweetgrass?

“It’s all around the course,” Mancilla says. “Sweetgrass is burned before any tribal meeting. It clears your mind. We thought, ‘For golf, what could be a more perfect thing?’ You can’t have bad thoughts in your head when you golf. It naturally fit. Plus, it has a wonderful smell.”

The tribe hopes that translates into the smell of success. **GCI**

*Mark Leslie is a freelance writer based in Monmouth, Maine. He can be reached at gripfast@adelphia.net.*

The all-sand California greens were grassed with L-93 bentgrass. Photo: EPIC Creative



Permanent & Portable  
Moisture Removal & Aeration

Hydronics

Control & Monitoring Packages

Durable, Dependable  
Turf Fans

[www.subairsystems.com](http://www.subairsystems.com)

[www.turfbreeze.com](http://www.turfbreeze.com)

866.641.6663

[www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice](http://www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice) - #40