

Backers of this Puerto Rican resort defied heavy odds both in building the course and in getting it ready for play in a few months—and they won both bets.



El Conquistador's gamble

by Frank Leber

Gambling, as a general rule, does not pay off too well in the long run. But two determined young men, golf architect Bob von Hagge and greens superintendent Felix C. Paguaga, have hit the jackpot with the El Conquistador Hotel and Golf Club course in Las Croabas, Puerto Rico. Parlaying their determination and strong belief in their own talents, with faith in Ormond blend and Tifdwarf, they have produced one of the most spectacular golf courses in the Caribbean area.

And the growing time for the grass was less than three months!

El Conquistador Hotel was a small hideaway, located high on the craggy bluffs of Las Croabas. Its chief claim to fame, other than the magnificent scenery in the area, was a cable car that took guests from the top of the cliff to the bathing beach below. About a year and a half ago Lou Purò, owner of the El San Juan Hotel, bought the property and set out on a \$28 million dollar expansion program.

High on the list of priorities was a golf course. Several architects were invited to inspect the area and submit their plans. Only one, von Hagge, a former PGA touring pro, believed that a golf course could be carved from those rugged cliffs. The others said it was an impossible

site. Before he started on the project, von Hagge enlisted the services of Felix Paguaga.

Felix is Honduran by birth, but completed his schooling in the U.S., receiving his B.S. in agronomy from the University of Florida at Gainesville, and had risen to the position of superintendent at the plush Royal Palm Yacht and Country Club, Boca Raton, Florida. He, too, saw tremendous potential in the site and recognized the inherent challenge.

All too often a greens superintendent is called into the picture after the course has been built, and he must struggle evermore with the

mistakes unnoticed in the construction period. In this particular case Felix was actively involved in every phase of the effort, more so than any other individual.

From March, 1966, when the first piece of equipment cut a swath through the tangled jungle growth, Felix was there. He had left a secure position, with a minimum of problems and duties, to ride herd on a virtual army of men and equipment. His work days stretched into 14 and 16 hour shifts, as he checked and re-checked plans and details, and operated machines to get the results he desired.

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George Buck, El Conquistador's golf pro, tees off at the 197-yard seventh hole where Ormond blend was used. Photo was taken three months after planting.

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One year later, March, 1967, they were ready for their initial planting. After many hours of study and deliberation Felix decided to gamble on using Ormond blend in the fairways, and Tifdwarf for the greens and aprons. Should the gamble pay off, they would have a golf course for the winter season.

Released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture only two years ago, the Ormond blend and the Tifdwarf had proven successful at several courses in Georgia and Florida. Would it work in the Caribbean area? They were certain that the Bermuda blend that had been so successful in the past would do the job. However, this would take a much longer growing period, and, when grown, would provide a wiry, net-like covering on the fairways, and fast, slick greens.

Having made the decision, they started boldly . . . but in three days they had to discontinue. Water, one of the most precious commodities of the islands, was not to be had. While the course site had six wells on it, and preliminary engineering tests had indicated a more than sufficient supply of water, the engineering reports proved to be erroneous and the wells ran dry. Helplessly, they watched the original plantings burn up and die.

Two and a half miles away lay a reservoir on another piece of property owned by the hotel. Felix turned to this site as the solution. But to get the water meant laying two and a half miles of piping, all underground. More than six weeks of seemingly endless red tape and legal work were necessary to obtain required easements, rights of way, and various governmental agencies' approval.

Finally, in the early days of September '67, the planting got under way. Now came the period of agonizing waiting. Would the gamble pay off?

Within one month, the fairways were covered and thriving, and the greens were lush and hardy. Within three months the fairways and greens were the equal of any on the island, healthy enough to withstand daily play—just in time for the on-rush of the winter tourists. They had won the gamble.

There were several reasons for the success: the new type of grass itself; the good climate; and proper care, fertilizing and watering.

Two methods of planting were used. On the slopes and fairways, they used hydromulching; however, the sprigs for the green were planted by hand, followed by a straight cutter, and then rolled into the ground.

The Ormond blend, used in the

fairways, has the advantage of covering more quickly than any other type. But the question that plagued them was would it take to a shallow soil base and the hot humid climate? While Felix would have liked six inches of base, in many areas due to the rock formations, he had to be content with less than four, and in some remote areas barely more than two.

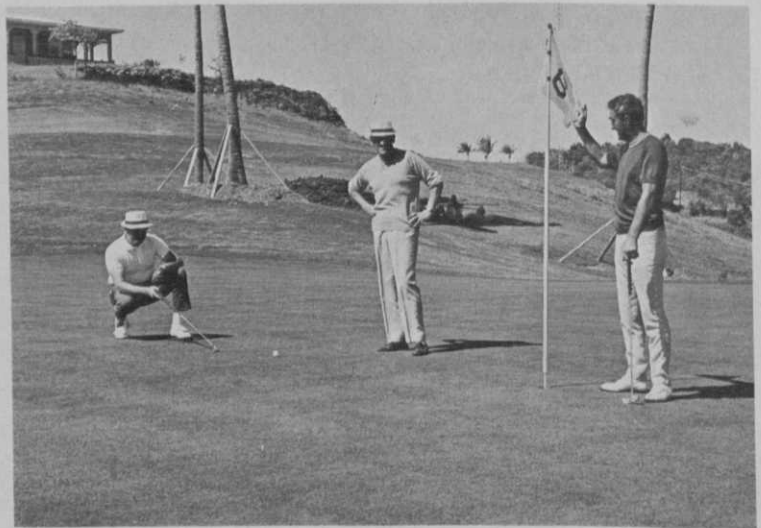
With the Tifdwarf on the greens and collars, the only way a golfer can tell the difference is in the height, such is the fullness produced. The greens have enough body to stand daily play, and surprisingly hold shots hit into them very well—yet no ball marks are apparent. The ball seems to sink into the green and then pop up.

On the fairway the ball sits up on the Ormond blend and the golfer can take a normal divot, unlike hitting from the Bermuda type where the ball must be swept off with very little or no divot.

An interesting fact is that El Conquistador is the only golf course in the Caribbean area that has used Ormond blend and Tifdwarf. Most of them use a 328 Bermuda blend for everything.

The first fertilizer put down in the planting was 15-15-15 to soil mix. This mixture was put down every day for the first week. Starting with the second week and every two

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The rapid growth and fullness of the Tifdwarf blend is in good evidence here. Photo at left was taken one month after planting, while the photo at right was snapped at the three-month mark. Note how grass has become even-textured.

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weeks thereafter, for the growing period of three months, they used a blend of ammonium sulphate and ammonium nitrate.

During the first ten days, the greens and the fairways were watered lightly and frequently to keep the surface moist. (The roughs are never watered.) Now, after the growing period, the greens get watered 1/4 inch every day and the fairways get watered 1/2 inch every two days.

Some higher areas of the course, more exposed to the sun and wind, and not getting the benefit of any runoff, get additional water.

The course has a center line, fully automated system with pop-up sprinklers. The controllers are housed in the maintenance building.

Fairway mowers are set at 1/2 inch, aprons at 3/8 inch and greens at 1/4 inch. Greens and aprons are cut daily, while fairways are cut every other day.

In talking about the frenzied activity during the construction



George Buck, (l) hotel's pro, and Felix Paguaga, course superintendent, hold one of their informal breakfast sessions.

phase, Felix is quick to point out how much the close association with von Hagge paid off.

Knowing what he had to work with as to site conditions, and anticipating problems that might arise when the course was completed, Felix could make his plans accordingly and be in a good position to meet these problems.

It would not be necessary to tear out finished greens or fairways to handle unexpected drainage problems, or to lift and re-plant a

palm tree. All this was dealt with in the construction phase.

Drainage ditches and culverts were placed at the base of hills, so that the runoff would be carried away from low spots in the fairways, or around greens and bunkers. Palm trees were painstakingly charted, and the fast proliferating native foliage was retained only in areas where the growth could be handled with a minimum amount of supervision.

In keeping the course in shape, Paguaga makes use of 25 full time course workers, and two assistants. His mechanical equipment includes 10 greens mowers, two hydraulic fairway cutters, two rough mowers, four spikers and aerators, four thin cutters, and two sub-cutters.

As we talked and watched the last phases of the clean-up, Felix kept looking toward an adjoining hill.

When asked what was drawing his attention, he said: "Our next course. It's going to be over there. Another 18 holes, and we expect to have it ready next season." □

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