

# Paspalum's 'other' expert

*Superintendent lands first job as salt-tolerant turf consultant*

By Michael A. Boslet

**When Stewart Bennett, CGCS, bought Alden Pines Country Club in 1993, he had never seen seashore paspalum turfgrass. Alden Pines was covered with it, had been since the course was built in 1980. A superintendent by training and course owner by avocation, Bennett had no idea that he had stumbled into his future.**

Fast forward to 2002, when a visitor to Alden Pines, a low-budget layout on Pine Island off the southwest coast of Florida, introduced himself to Bennett. Golf course architect Tom Mackenzie remembers reading about Alden Pines' plethora of seashore paspalums in an article written by then-University of Georgia turfgrass researcher Ronny Duncan, Ph.D., who had taken samples from the course in 1994. Mackenzie needed expert advice on the saltwater-tolerant turfgrass, and he wondered if Bennett were the right person to give it to him.

Bennett's Alden Pines didn't have just one type of seashore paspalum, but several subspecies of the original variety on the course, Adalayd, and each had different characteristics. Some patches of seashore paspalum tolerated shade, others withstood low mowing, and yet other areas of the warm-season turf weren't harmed by cold snaps. Still, the common denominator of all of the varieties was salt tolerance, and on that account Bennett found he could irrigate with brackish water containing up to 12,000 ppm salinity. With such a high salt content in the irrigation water, weeds were virtually nonexistent on the course.

"I noticed there were differences between turfgrasses all over the place," said Bennett, 42. "The first

year or two, I just figured out the grasses."

Which brings Bennett to 1995-96. Before him lay 55 acres of turfgrass that thrived despite high salinity in the irrigation wells, which had been contaminated by saltwater intrusion from the Gulf of Mexico. The grasses even survived a hurricane-induced storm surge that flooded the course with saltwater. His herbicide and fungicide budgets for the course were next to nothing, and the grasses needed only low spoon feedings of nitrogen for green up.

"I got to thinking there's got to be a commercial end to this," Bennett said.

And thus began Bennett's venture into selecting varieties of seashore paspalum from Alden Pines with the intent to patent and sell them. Bennett is believed to be the only golf course superintendent in the country, and perhaps the world, who has patented turfgrasses and licenses them for sale through growers. His niche also has led him into agronomic consulting, a field usually reserved for the Green Section or university turfgrass researchers.

Unbeknownst to Bennett, Mackenzie was about to become his first client. Mackenzie's visit to Alden Pines was as much about seeing seashore paspalum as it was about seeing if Bennett would be right for the job as a turfgrass and soil consultant on a luxury class golf course to be built in the Abacos, an island in the Bahamas.

Although Duncan was considered the go-to guy on seashore paspalum, and had developed some successful varieties of the grass, Mackenzie took the road never before traveled and hired Bennett.

"Yes, it was a gamble," Mackenzie said of his decision.

Besides deciding on what types of



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ABACO CLUB AT WINDING BAY

*The Abaco Club at Winding Bay in the Bahamas was grassed with two seashore paspalum varieties developed by superintendent Stewart Bennett.*

seashore paspalum were best suited for the course, which stretches over sandy soil and sand-capped rocky outcroppings embraced by the Atlantic Ocean, a superintendent needed to be trained to maintain it.

Bennett took Scotsman Mark Aitken under his wing, putting him up in Alden Pines' clubhouse guest room for six weeks in 2003. Aitken came to the Abaco Club by the way of Skibo Castle in Highlands, Scotland, where he was an assistant superintendent.

During his apprenticeship, Aitken worked with Bennett on Alden Pines, learning the intricacies of managing seashore paspalum and experimenting with varieties that might be best for the Abaco Club. Aitken said Bennett could lend technical expertise without being too technical, and his "get your hands dirty" approach to work impressed Mackenzie.

The Abaco Club turned out to be tough land to tame, with tropical vegetation so thick Aitken said he needed a GPS to keep from getting lost. Bennett worked the land, too, bringing out soil samples that he took back with him aboard the single-engine aircraft he piloted on site visits to the Abacos.

Mackenzie decided on two cultivars originally patented by Bennett: SeaDwarf for the greens and SeaGreen for the fairways and roughs. This quickly proved to be the right choice.

"This (course) has to be hurricane proof. And I was right," Mackenzie said. "We didn't expect to find out so quickly. . . . It was astonishing how the grass performed."

Just a few months before its opening, the Abaco Club course was pounded last September by Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne, bringing with them waves of seawater crashing over the course.

Aitken said some portions of the course inundated by the Atlantic turned shades of brown, but after a week or two of drying out the grass returned to its original vigor.

"If we didn't have Stew's grass, we wouldn't have opened after two hurricanes last year," Aitken said.

With the course open, Bennett remains in touch with Aitken and continues to fly to the Abacos to check on the progress of the grasses. During his trips, he often brings supplies that Aitken can't wait the usual three weeks for delivery from the mainland.

Now that he has his first consulting gig under his belt – at a high-end, ultraprivate course, no less – Bennett hopes others will follow so he can tout more than one client.

"It's tough to advertise a client list when you have only one big one," he said. "But you have to start somewhere."

*Executive editor Michael A. Boslet can be reached at [mboslet@golfweek.com](mailto:mboslet@golfweek.com).*