

Getting Your Green Back Without Greenbacks

Recovering from devastation on a shoestring budget.

by LARRY GILHULY



Rhizomatous regrowth of seashore paspalum allows a small nursery to be reused up to three times per year.

VIRTUALLY every golf course has had to deal with high winds and the resulting cleanup that lasts for days or weeks before the course is back to normal. But how many have had to deal with a truly *big challenge* that required a *unique solution*? Put yourself in this situation. A weather station air speed indicator located 25 miles from your site recorded a wind gust of 230 mph just before it was obliterated! Your golf course was directly in the path of the same winds, and all of the local hotels that lodge your clientele are completely wiped out from the force of the hurricane. This was the situation faced by the entire island of Kauai in 1992 when Hurricane Iniki devastated the Garden Isle. This turf tip is about one golf course that found a unique way to bring “green” back despite the lack of “greenbacks.”

Kiahuna’s Big Challenge

Kiahuna Golf Club is found on the dry southwest side of Kauai and relies heavily on tourist play. After Iniki inflicted its fury, the monumental job of cleaning the golf course was faced by the staff of 18. During the next three months, the maintenance staff removed

portions of homes and other buildings, trees, and other debris from their site. While this first challenge was eventually overcome, the next three years of challenge included:

- *Staff size reduced to 5.* Without play and the resulting income, Kiahuna became a mow-and-irrigate operation.

- *Drastic reduction in fertilizer and complete elimination of herbicides.*

Kiahuna’s Unique Solution

In 1995, Robert Medeiros was hired as the golf course superintendent and immediately faced the monumental task of reducing weed populations. As a member of the maintenance staff prior to assuming the superintendent’s position, he had noticed that a very aggressive grass (seashore paspalum) had been introduced with bermudagrass sod after small renovations in the late 1980s. Seashore paspalum is a warm-season grass adapted to temperate and tropical climates.

After Iniki, seashore paspalum began to take over the ninth fairway as the existing bermudagrass offered little resistance when the fertilizer was eliminated. After watching this grass outperform bermudagrass and weeds

on his site, Mr. Medeiros decided that the unique solution to his biggest challenge was changing the grass to the more desirable seashore paspalum.

Many golf courses have undergone the major renovation of changing grasses on greens, tees, and fairways. However, few, if any, have used the following unique methods created by Mr. Medeiros.

- *Nursery establishment.* After using sod on site for spot treatments, a quarter-acre nursery was established from sprigs in 1997.

- *Strip sodding tees.* Starting in 1998 through today, nearly 90% of the tees have been strip sodded, leaving a 5" to 6" gap between the strips of sod to make the nursery cover a larger area. Due to the unique salt tolerance of seashore paspalum, common table salt is then sprinkled on the bermudagrass to suppress growth. The tee is practically 100% seashore paspalum within several weeks.

- *Sprigging fairways.* Approximately 7 to 10 days after an application of Roundup, a selected area of the fairway (never an entire fairway) is aerified in four directions and then covered with seashore paspalum sprigs. The sprigs are rolled and lightly covered with mulch to retain moisture from the four daily syringings provided by an above-ground, temporary irrigation system. Within four months the area is nearly 100% converted to seashore paspalum. Common table salt is used as the herbicide for goosegrass and bermudagrass reinvasion.

The future includes completion of all tees and fairways and the possibility of converting the greens. The fertilizer and herbicide budget has returned as players provide the revenue; however, Mr. Medeiros reports these costs are currently 40% to 50% less than the pre-Iniki levels, with greatly improved playing conditions. It is safe to say that Kiahuna has gotten its “green” back despite the lack of “greenbacks”!

LARRY GILHULY is director of the USGA Green Section Northwest Region.