

Zeon Zoysia & the Rio Olympic Golf Course

Project Statement

Our client, David Doguet, owner of Bladerunner Farms—and a founding member of Team Zoysia, an affiliation of golf industry professionals interested in promoting low maintenance zoysiagrass for use in golf—spent nearly four years preparing for the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As a well-respected turfgrass breeder, Doguet worked to get his environmentally friendly turfgrass, Zeon Zoysia, selected as the grass for the first golf course ever built for an Olympic Games. He hand-selected the grass shipped from his farm in Texas, helped grow it in on two farms in Brazil, helped transplant the grass to the Olympic Golf Course site, personally planted sod and sprigs of grass at the location, and traveled several times each year to help the golf course superintendent, Neil Cleverly, to ready the course for Olympic competition. The approach of the Games should have been a time of celebration. Instead, our research showed that in the months leading up to the Rio Games, the media coverage was almost all negative—stories about crime, corruption, pollution at the Olympic venue sites, protests, and the Zika virus that caused some of golf's marquis players to opt out of the Olympic Team, all grabbed headlines. Yet, we knew our client had a positive story to tell about golf at the Olympics. Our goal was to change the worldwide conversation about Olympic golf.

Situation/Planning

After 112-years, golf returned as an Olympic sport at the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Our client, Bladerunner Farms, had invested nearly four years of development and planning for the Games and aided in the construction of the golf course built especially for golf's return. Doguet developed a low water use, environmentally friendly grass that was selected for use on the fairways, tees and roughs of the Olympic Golf Course. Our job was to change the conversation away from all of the negativity and guide the worldwide media to tell a different story, a positive one. We had an environmentally friendly story to tell—one that would help the Olympic Committee fulfill its goal of hosting a Sustainable Games, which was part of its mission. Our client's product, Zeon Zoysia grass, grew in on the golf course with low quality water, very little fertilizer and no chemical herbicides—meaning all weeds on the more than 100-acre site were pulled by hand. It was a huge story!

We realized that most of the professional media covering the Olympics would be sportswriters, not grass experts. To steer the conversation to the grass and its environmentally beneficial attributes, we developed materials to first alert the media to the sustainability angle, and then educate them as to the science, benefits and even hurdles overcome to bring the golf course to green, vibrant life.

The first step was to create an online press room that would serve as a 24/7 repository for worldwide media members to access as they covered the approach of the games, as well as during the two-week period when the men's and then women's competition would be held. The press room included a full archive of press releases that gave the complete history of the grass selection, construction of the golf course, and test event prior to the Games. We created a FACT SHEET that explained in layman's terms the scientific benefits of the grass, pronunciations, significant dates and other facts that could be easily inserted into stories. We even included information in the fact sheet on the grass selected for the golf course's greens surfaces (not our client's product) so that the fact sheet would be complete and considered unbiased. Not an easy sell to the client, but it was necessary to earn credibility.

Other elements in the press room were a photo archive linked to Dropbox for easy download that

would not require media from around the world to contact us directly. We felt the self-serve element was imperative given time zones and deadline restrictions during the Games. We included a summary that served as our pitch on the history of the construction of the course, and bulleted points to make our case as to why this part of the Olympic story mattered. We created a press release announcing the launch of the press room and sent it out to our golf industry media list. The editor of Golf Course Industry magazine, Pat Jones, emailed me after visiting the press room and said *"You are extraordinarily good at your job. That might be the best press kit I've ever seen."* That certainly made my day and gave me confidence that our strategy was correct. We also enlisted PR Newswire to send the release to their list of reporters who said they'd be covering the Games.

Our client travelled to Rio the week before the Games, and was there for the two weeks of competition. Our job during that time was to field calls and emails from reporters and to serve as his point person during the competition. He emailed us exclusive photos that he shot daily of the golf venue and players in competition, that we disseminated to the media and used on our client's various social media accounts. He called several times from Rio to get a gauge on how the Games were being perceived, and to learn what the anchors were saying on The Golf Channel—the only television coverage he could get in Rio was in Portuguese!

Evaluation/Effectiveness

Website traffic to BladerunnerFarms.com increased by 250% during the Olympic month of August. The site had 11,893 views during August with an average 384 views per day, versus the prior three months when the average number of views was just 3,472 per month and 147 views per day. On Friday, August 12th, during the men's golf competition, the site had 926 views! While on the ground in Rio, our client served as the "reporter at the Games" for two golf industry publications: Superintendent magazine and Golf Course Management, (GCM) the official publication of the Golf Course Superintendent's Association of America. He phoned and emailed in reports to me and to the editors, offering his expert perspective. He was featured in a series of three blog/newsletter reports for Superintendent magazine, and in two reports for Golf Course Management, as well as a cover story in GCM's August issue. Coverage in the golf and turf industry trades was widespread, as would be expected. But we wanted more than that. We wanted the consumer pubs to suddenly be talking about grass.

Our objective was to change the conversation around golf at the Olympics. And we succeeded! David Doguet, Bladerunner Farms and/or Zeon Zoysia were mentioned in sports and consumer media reports worldwide, on the Golf Channel, (the official home of NBC's golf coverage during the Olympics) in golf's PGA & European Tour reports of the Games, in daily newspapers from Germany to Canada to Texas to San Diego. Texas television news reporters descended on our client's farm in tiny Poteet, Texas, (south of San Antonio), which directly impacted an increase in local turfgrass sod sales.

A story in **Newsday** said of Olympic Golf Course Designer Gil Hanse, "Perhaps his greatest legacy from Rio will be his decision to cover almost all of the course with a new strain of grass called Zeon Zoysia, which requires less water and fertilizer than other grasses and could thus foster developments in South America and other warm climates." We worked with John Clarke of The **New York Times** to help him write a Sunday New York Times Sports Section Cover story detailing the journey of our client's grass from the farm in Poteet, Texas, to Brazil; how the grass addressed the eco-friendly issues; and how it produced a world-class playing surface worthy of its own gold medal. Golf Digest awarded the Olympic Golf Course their "Green Star Award" in a story called "When Green is Gold," and in a separate issue, **Golf Digest** named David Doguet to their annual list of Innovators & Influencers of 2016. Who knew grass could be the big story at the Games? Well, we did.