

# CLUBE DE GOLF DO VALE DO LOBO

by C. J. R. PITMAN

(Head Greenkeeper)

SIR RICHARD COSTAIN, being a regular visitor to Portugal especially to the sundrenched area on the south coast that is called the Algarve, and also being a scratch golfer, mused to himself one day, "What a lovely district in which to have a golf course". He set about finding a site and an architect and shortly came up with the dramatic Vale do Lobo (Valley of the Wolf) area situated 15 miles west of Faro and an international airport. For his architect he chose his old school friend, Henry Cotton, M.B.E., and together they laid the first plans of his dream.

Now, at the end of 1967, the course is almost completed but unfortunately Sir Richard Costain did not live to see and play it. He died in March 1966.

I was enrolled and brought out to the Algarve in December of that year to work as head greenkeeper and, having only twenty-four years in all and six years in the golf world behind me, I was rather bewildered at how I had been so lucky as to have won this chance. However, Mr Cotton said to me: "You can do this job as well as any older man who has twenty years' experience behind him. You will find the conditions out there very different from greenkeeping in the U.K. and your work at Richmond."

How I was to find out the truth in those words.

Vale do Lobo is a championship layout with a total length of 7,030 yards. Having four par 3's and five par 5's (one of 600 yards) it is set on the coast and winds pleasantly through fig, olive, cork, pine and eucalyptus groves. The short seventh hole is particularly spectacular as your tee shot is fired out over the cliffs to a tightly bunkered green some 200 yards away. On leaving this hole we walk to the high elevated eighth tee and drive out across a valley to play alongside the new luxury Dona Filipa Hotel that Costains have built for Trust

Houses. The course has been constructed in two halves because of land purchase problems and so I was to be in charge of the already seeded first nine holes until the second half had been constructed and was ready for seeding.

Most of the natural terrain is almost pure sand having very little plant food qualities and obviously unable to hold any water at all, and so some 12 inches below the excellent but imported top soil on the greens and tees an artificial impermeable clay barrier was constructed. This is working extremely well in holding moisture and so less is required from the irrigation system.

Of course we could not line the fairways with clay and so, frighteningly, consume a gigantic amount of water. However, we have installed the pop-up sprinkler set up on all parts of the course which is proving a necessity in this part of the world for most of the year.

The greens on the first nine holes sown just before I arrived in October 1966 with the Penncross Bent, and the tees and fairways with a hard-wearing mixture of *Festuca Rubra*, *Agrostis Alba* and the *Cynodon Dactylon*. In fact the greens were sown at two ounces per square yard which is far too great a rate for Penncross because of the fine quality, creeping power and of the amount of seeds to the pound. Penncross makes wonderful greens but when too thick is very susceptible to fungus attack. As a result of the thick sowing there were many outbreaks of Dollar Spot and *Fusarium* and so, without knowledge of what types of fungicides were available, I set about finding the answer as my first task and finally we finished up with a crop fungicide which was based on zinc. Now we have found a good mercuric product and are spraying the Penncross once every two weeks as a preventative.

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Of course at this stage of the game my command of the Portuguese language was just about zero and so my requirements were not understood to the full.

“Go and switch the grass!”

“What is that, sir?”

Just one of the first problems. All my boys are Portuguese so at first it was extremely difficult especially as none of them had even seen a golf course before and must have thought we were quite mad trying to grow fine grass in their climate. Realising that the local labour and knowledge did not amount to much I began training, all the time becoming more and more aware of how little I knew of this country.

Happily I was granted a very adequate stock of British greenkeeping equipment so this was something. The only snag is that we have to carry many spares because of unavailability out here. For example, we have two sets of quintuple gang mowers and six

machines for green mowing just to cover breakdowns and, as an extra cover, a complete set of gang mower cutting cylinders. One can imagine trying to buy grassland tyres for the tractors in a country that does not indulge in grass growing.

The disease was checked by January and with thick dressings of rich soil from the local hills and our own sandy vineyard soil, we gradually built up a true surface on tees and greens. Also with fertiliser the grass would thicken considerably, but here was another problem in finding a good complete fertiliser. I finally achieved this from an analysis of plant food requirements I had had in a mixture in England and then proceeding to the local company and hunting through their warehouse until I found something reasonably close. Of course quantities and application rates are in the metric system.

(To be continued next month)

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