GOLF IN SWEDEN

by

Michael Williams

AFTER being presented with the first prize for the Scotec Greenkeeping and Groundsmanship course at Elmwood College, Cupar, Michael Williams, an assistant at The Gleneagles Hotel, was invited to participate in an exchange visit organised between the hotel and Ljunghusen Golf Klubb in Sweden.

My host, Stig Persson, was the high profile chairman of the Swedish Greenkeepers Association and general manager of Ljunghusen golf course. I worked during my first day in Sweden at Ljunghusen and then went on to the Swedish Greenkeepers Conference in the evening. This was held at Hollviken, about 30 miles south of Malmo on the south western tip of Sweden. The Falsterbo peninsula is a tourists' resort with three golf courses; Ljunghusen; Falsterbo, the oldest in Sweden; and Flommen. The three golf courses host the PLM Open in rotation. This year, the tournament is being hosted by the Falsterbo club.

The Ljunghusen club is 55 years old and has been extended twice since its conception in 1932; in 1954 to an 18 hole course, and then again in 1965 when an extra nine holes were added. The course was originally built as a nine hole golf course during the first boom in Swedish golf in the 1930's. Since then, as is happening all over Europe, the country is experiencing a second boom, with many new golf courses being constructed. At the eastern edge of the golf course is the Ljung nature reserve where many migratory birds assemble from both Sweden and Norway before continuing south.

salt marsh

The golf course is constructed on a salt marsh, having approximately six inches of semi-decomposed peat on top of a pure sand base. There is obviously a very high water table with many lagoons scattered around the course. With such a high water table, during winter the ground can freeze to a depth of 5ft, which results in a mass die-back of the grass. This problem does not exist solely at Ljunghusen, but throughout Sweden. Alongside the problem of winter freezing is that of low light levels. Greenkeeping practices therefore have to be adjusted to encourage the growth of grass under such restrictive conditions.

aeration

Aeration is not carried out to the same extent as in the UK. I cannot recall seeing any aeration equipment, although the greens had been hollow-cored with four inch centres. Sand is taken from the beach at Skanor and is stockpiled for a year before being used by all three golf courses on the Falsterbo peninsula. At Ljunghusen they add nothing to the sand - it is spread over the green using a fertiliser spreader mounted to a Ford 1710 tractor. Once the sand has been spread there is no rush to clear the green. During such operations a composite course is used, i.e. playing the first nine then holes 19-27. The golfers are extremely patient. If a greenkeeper is working on a green the golfer cannot play until the green is clear, and could forfeit his membership if he were to play a shot prematurely. Ljunghusen have two Toro triplex mowers and no handmowers. One is set for cutting the greens, while the
other is used on the tees. Despite
the fact that greens are not
excessively large, the total
dependence upon Toro's was due
to shortages of staff.
Once a green or tee has been cut,
no switching is done. Many of
the tees I came across, not only
at Ljunghusen but throughout
Sweden, were largely uneven
and narrow, with very little
room for moving a tee box
laterally. One or two courses
has resorted to the use of
artificial tees.

sponsorship
It would appear that almost
anything on the golf course can
be sponsored - from the
greenkeeper's pick-up to the
holes on the course. Stig
Persson drives a Subaru pick-
up which is literally covered
from bumper to bumper with
sponsors' emblems.
School children are sent to the
club twice a year for a fortnight
at a time to gain practical
experience. They can choose for
themselves which area of
industry they prefer - anything
from banking to greenkeeping.

conference
The Swedish Greenkeepers
Conference took place at
Hollsiken during the week I was
in Sweden and was held at an
army camp which had been
leased out for the duration.
There was an international
flavour to the conference, and
Gordon Whittesten from
Toronto in Canada gave a
speech on his personal
mistakes over 25 years! This
covered everything from
mishaps with weedkillers, to
greens which had to be
reconstructed after being used
just once, to the inevitable
caddie-car in a bunker.
Weibulls, the seed company who
have given us Poa
pretensio 'Sydsport', Agrostis
tenuis 'Boral' and Agrostis
stolonifera 'Emerald' gave us a
tour of their headquarters.

peninsular
After the conference I was
invited to visit Molle Golf
Klubb, which is situated in the
Kullaberg National Park on the
outskirts of the town of Molle.
The golf course is situated at the
end of a peninsular, which is
also the home of Europe's most
powerful lighthouse.
There are many deciduous
trees on the course, the majority
of which are beech 'Fagus
sylvatica'. The course is under
the control of the national park
and any work undertaken
requires their authorisation.
Consequently, there are very
few grassed tees - the majority
are artificial. There are only
three bunkers on the whole
course, and one was the result of
a tree falling down in front of
the second green - the hole it
made wasn't filled in!
The greenkeepers' shed is
extremely cramped and
somewhat reminiscent of an
antique shop, with two tractors
dating back to the 1950's! The
environmentalists will not
allow the club to expand the
sheds.
Molle was far removed from
what I had seen at Ljunghusen.
The greenkeeper there was
proud of the fact that his greens
were switched daily. The
switch, incidentally, was
adapted from an old fishing
rod, and it was hard work to
move it across the grass.

expansion
Sweden is Europe's second
largest golfing nation after
Britain, and is currently
experiencing a period of
expansion. Throughout the
country there are many new
courses being built or being
extended into 18 or 27 hole
complexes. Many of these clubs
are expanding their range of
facilities by building country
cubs, with shooting and
fishing offered as an
alternative to golf.
This period of growth is being
fuelled by large amounts of
money being injected into the
industry through sponsorship,
etc. This is keeping the price of
a game of golf extremely low
compared to Britain -
approximately half in real
terms.
Many greenkeepers have an
agricultural background and
an attempt is being made by
the SGA to improve their
system of education, but there
are no specific courses being
offered for greenkeeping
training.
Perhaps this is a measure
of how far they have to go -
hopefully they will succeed.