

Contrasting national attitudes

THE past three years have seen those responsible for the maintenance of British golf courses turn something of a corner. Some conferences are no longer simply an excuse for golfing days off, playing for trade-donated prizes. They are developing along the lines well-known to other professions and are increasingly run by the greenkeepers themselves. Those who attended *Golf Course '84* at Cambridge or this year's EIGGA and SIGGA conferences at Warwick and St Andrews know how well they are being organised. I feel sorry for those greenkeepers - and their clubs - who have not yet realised what they are missing.

One most instructive feature for many of us has been the realisation of the widely different attitudes to golf course maintenance in different countries. It is some time since we were told, in no uncertain terms, that we were light years behind the Americans. Of course, nobody mentioned the climatic differences that make many comparisons irrelevant, but the Americans certainly have a different industry. It's big, bouncy and booming, full of new ideas and high-pressure salesmanship that goes well with high customer 'cosmetic' expectations. Above

all, it is expensive. The budget for an American course can be five to ten times as big as for a British equivalent and the same goes for wages.

Listening to speakers from The New World, I am mainly impressed by their enthusiasm and courage. Methods are described with conviction but, here, some doubts begin to enter my mind. The dictionary defines the word empirical as 'based on observation or experiment' not on theory.' That word, for me, sums up American greenkeeping and, as we know from so many technical areas, including medicine, if you don't know why something works, your results will be unpredictable and prone to side-effects.

Perhaps I am being unfair. There are so many different climatic regions in America, whereas the whole of Great Britain (with some variation in rainfall from north west to south east) falls into one climatic region - the maritime temperate zone. So we cannot expect to be told the ecological justification for every procedure in every American locality. The trouble is we do not hear really scientific justification for anything at all. We do see the increasing obsession with presentation as opposed to quality. We see magazines crammed

with hard-selling advertisements, especially for chemicals. If everything is so good, why do they need all these corrective measures? Maybe they have a lot to teach us but, for the present, put me down as being not yet convinced.

The Swedes are another nation with a booming golf business and they certainly have something to teach us. We could all learn from their insistence on proper organisation, preparation and tuition. Everyone must attend courses before being let loose - even the chairman of the green committee! There were nearly 50 Swedes at SIGGA's conference - almost outnumbering the Scots. A trait they share with the Canadians is taking on the most difficult conditions. Golf courses are being built further and further north - with four inside the Arctic Circle. The winter damage may be so great that the repairs each year approach the size of a complete reconstruction. With shortened seasons, as well as these climatic factors, golf is an expensive game, but the customers are there.

Our friends from the Continent present a varying picture. High cost, high investment projects are balanced by quite modest layouts with modest standards. Greenkeepers are enthusiastic



The new Sports Turf Research Institute.

and seem to make the most of any opportunity to learn more.

There was one important conference in Europe this year about which we have heard very little. The International Turfgrass Society is for all the academic institutions - the colleges, research institutes and universities. The ITS conference is held every four years at different venues across the world. This year, the Fifth International Turfgrass Conference took place in Avignon near Paris and the research institutes at Bingley and Aberystwyth were both represented.

At its conclusion, we found several delegates making their way round Britain to view the current scene. It was no great surprise to me to find them in rather a grim mood. There was a general feeling that the methods in use in so many countries had clearly failed and led to *Poa annua* dominated swards. It was, therefore, no thrill to come here and tour round only to find that the same blight had descended on our courses.

I found considerable interest in talking to all these 'tourists,' but one in particular fired my imagination. Dr Yoskisuiki Maki, professor of agronomy at the Akita Prefectural College in Japan, was elected president of the International Turfgrass Society for the next four years. The next conference, in 1989, will be held in Tokyo.

Some weeks before his visit, I received a fascinating letter from Dr Maki explaining that, with the help of Dr Peter Hayes of the STRI, he had arranged a tour of Britain. The detailed itinerary was enclosed. He proposed to drive himself over 2,000 miles, visiting two research institutes and 15 golf courses. He expressed his mission thus: "I have long wanted the opportunity of learning more from you about the spiritual background of golf prototype, golf course layout and the traditional way of turfgrass maintenance." A refreshingly thorough approach, so I thought I had better do some homework!

Japan has already had one golf boom, which was cut short by the 1973 oil crisis. Now there is another spurt with 1,400 golf courses scheduled to rise rapidly to over 2,000. As a nation, the Japanese spent 70 million man-days last year playing golf. All this in a crowded country where the

only space available is on the mountainous central areas of the string of islands that comprise Japan. Australian and American architects and constructors have initiated the building of courses, often at enormous expense. Great imagination has been displayed in order to make enough level ground available and lifts between holes are fairly commonplace. Dr Maki duly appeared at the appointed time and I was deeply impressed with his dedication, cordiality and expertise.

Some 30 years ago, he was sent by his country to study agronomy at Wisconsin, USA and had subsequently taught plant feeding at Tokyo University. However, in recent years it became evident that there were greater problems with golf courses and he moved to Akita, the turfgrass centre. He speaks good English and, carrying a battery of cameras and tape recorders, made notes on everything he saw. In five hours of discussion, I found a man who really knows his sciences, grasses and greenkeeping methods. Actually, the Japanese sent a large delegation, led by Dr Maki to Europe with a clear brief.

The present orthodoxy of turfgrass maintenance that has spread from America to so many countries, including Japan, is felt to be just not good enough and perhaps a return to the early sites of golf would provide a better understanding of the game and its problems, going right back to first principles and then starting

building on basic sciences. Dr Maki said: 'it was his duty to his country' to undertake this work.

On his return to Japan, he wrote to me: 'Most of the grasses, particularly *Poa annua*, on the golf courses here are dying and most parts of fairways are turning brown. I was surprised and excited (in Britain) at seeing real links, inland and inland heather courses with delicate undulations and natural beauty.'

So, now might be the time to start placing your bets on which nation will end up light years ahead. But we should not entirely write off the dark horse - Britain, which invented the game and had, naturally, the finest golfing turf in the world. We could have it again if we stopped trying to copy, rather poorly, a game and turf that were always second best.

Thanks to other sports, there is now a bright new building in an old sunken rose garden just north of Bradford where British golf should be putting its money. Nearly 60 years ago, when the Board of Greenkeeping Research was established at Bingley, Norman Hackett wrote: 'Within a comparatively short time, their fellow scientists are able to confirm their hypothesis - it may be months or years, but the truth is finally established.' Things are, indeed, taking years, but the instrument is there at hand. All the things we guess at or assume can be put to the test. We might still come out on top!

EDDIE PARK



Dr Maki with the Lindrick course manager and staff.