M ost men find themselves dwarfed by Tracy Ruane. Yet she's an exceptionally tall person - tall for a woman. But then, for a woman, she has an exceptionally unusual job: At 29, she's head greenkeeper at Oulton Park Golf Club in Leeds - one of only two women head greenkeepers in the country. She is overflowing with enthusiasm for her work and in this she encapsulates the pride and optimism of the small body of women greenkeepers working in this country.

The male-dominated golfing establishment is generally perceived to be very hostile to the idea of women playing the game on an equal footing with the men. This could also be said to be true of the golf professions, given the tiny percentage of women, even in the USA, who work in the industry as specialists, but the few who have been given responsibility as greenkeepers are witness on the whole to the fairness and generosity of their employers, who have begun to reverse the trend of discrimination by appointing them.

Apart from Tracy Ruane, Gerry Wigley is head greenkeeper at Oatessey (pronounced Cossey) Park Golf Club near Norwich, and Jane Ryan is assistant head greenkeeper at Abbeydale Golf Club near Sheffield. They have all taken different routes into the profession. All attest to having made a kind of "discovery": as Gerry put it, 'I never knew I liked grass so much'. Never knew, that is, until she did an intensive, full-time course in horticulture for two years at Pershore College which opened up a whole range of new options to her - favourite of which was greenkeeping. You couldn't really get a much greater acreage of grass anywhere other than a golf course to satisfy a love of grass.

Tracy Ruane's moment of truth came during a spell of greenkeeping during the second year of her four-year Leeds City Council Horticultural apprenticeship, when she was posted to Gotts Park golf course in Armley, West Leeds. 'Before I went there I'd always thought I'd be a gardener, but after I'd been at Gotts a while, I thought, no, this bears gardening hands down.' She asked to be allowed to stay on in greenkeeping for her third year. The apprenticeship involved rotating from year to year between gardening in parks, greenkeeping, arboriculture and work on the tree gangs, finally, a year in nursery work, but instead of going on to the third stage she was sent to Temple Newsam golf course for a few weeks to see how she got on with it. She ended up staying 18 months. 'Luckily for me there weren't many people that wanted to do golf. The ladies wanted to work with chainsaws and wear the ear muffs and ballistic trousers and the other girls either went into the parks or nurseries. For me it was golf'.

Jane Ryan was a farmer's daughter before meeting and marrying a greenkeeper and in so doing, being forever converted to the religion that, for many, is golf. According to legend, she badgered the committee where her husband was employed as head greenkeeper until they took her on temporarily for 25p an hour. She too was allowed to stay on - that was more than 15 years ago. She and Paul, her head greenkeeper husband, work successfully together at Abbeydale with their small team of men where they have been for nine years.

'So', the people ask, 'what do women greenkeepers do when they want to go to the toilet?'. The question may seem childish but in one sense it has a value. Any club which tries to provide its greenkeeping staff with the best sanitary and other facilities it can afford is one which is interested in the morale and well being of its men. If it values the work they do, the comfort of its women will be taken account of in the same way, and at Oulton, Tracy Ruane con-firms, the facilities are excellent.

Tracy is very proud of their mess room and she, in fact, has her own separate bathroom. She was also able to influence the City Council into providing her with a two-way radio in case she needed to contact a manager urgently, as she had cause to when an elderly golfer died out on the course. This prompted them into thinking of the security of the women that work for them outdoors in different parts of the city, and they have now supplied their female workforce with rape alarms.

The really striking thing about Tracy Ruane, however, is her powerful optimism and unshakeable confidence in her own and her team's ability. There is no reason why she shouldn't be confident, but looking at the record and seeing that she is the sixth head greenkeeper at Oulton in the last two years, you have to admire her guts. This time there is the feeling that Leeds City know they have the right woman for the job. Her relationship with the municipal system has been an extremely fruitful one. She is in no doubt of how just they have been to her: 'I can honestly say I have not been discriminated against at all, and I don't think that would have happened if I'd worked on a private course. I've been given the chance to train all the way.' She got her job with the Leeds City Council on leaving school at 16. It was her 'first and last' interview. Since discovering her vocation, she has worked for 12 years on the city's fine municipal golf courses, and now, as contractors for the City Council, she and her lads are in close touch with their contract managers, able to phone through whenever they need to pass on information or gain consent for work to be done. The managers come out regularly and discuss work in progress with all the greenkeepers working at Oulton and Tracy is justly proud of their separate bathrooms. She too has cause to when an elderly golfer died out on the course. This prompted them into thinking of the security of the women that work for them outdoors in different parts of the city, and they have now supplied their female workforce with rape alarms.

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designed by Dave Thomas and has only been open for two years. Tracy thinks it opened far too early, before it had adequate chance to establish and, with an average of 70,000 rounds per year, the problems in maintaining playing conditions have been enormous and have seen off several predecessors. They are also working on bringing a short nine-hole course into play at the same time, and on the day I visited building work was in full swing on the conversion of an old hall and annexe to a multi-star hotel and leisure complex.

Hence her excitement at being involved in the scheme from so near the beginning. It is an excitement which she has found she can channel into the enthusiasm of the lads. Of course the relationship of a head greenkeeper with his or her staff is an essential one. Tracy explained to me how much she admired the way her old boss, Eric Garlick, headed his team at Gotts Park, and sees in herself the same indomitable spirit that Tracy shows.

Few people are lucky enough to hit upon the right job for them first time, and unlike Tracy, Gerry Wigley worked in catering for many years, before indulging her interest in gardening by doing a job in a nursery and subsequently taking up the course in horticulture at Pershore. She has three children ranging in age from five to 18 and her husband, Ray, who trained as a systems analyst, now works as a greenkeeper alongside her at Costessey.

Gerry Wigley is more low-key in her approach than Tracy, but the conviction is there just as strongly. For a head greenkeeper she has relatively little experience behind her, but the intensive and in-depth education she has had, followed by two years' on-site training alongside two experienced greenkeepers has fuelled the same indomitable spirit that Tracy shows.

Problems of a different kind beset them at Costessy, which is a private club owned and run by the developer, but Tracy and Gerry are confident that the team at Oulton, the younger men being aged from 18 to 27. A river runs through the site and as the water table is high, they suffer very much from flooding during extended periods of rainfall, although they usually manage to avoid closing the whole course.

The distinctive thing about Costessy is the extent to which Colin House, the owner, is involved in the co-ordination of the club's responsibilities to the upkeep of the course. There is no green committee or green chairman for Gerry to present her reports to - she deals directly with Colin on issues of purchase and planning. The golfers support her in her ambitions for the best, working closely together, and some think that, as someone who had no experience of golf course development before Costessy, 'he's done pretty damn well for his members'. It is these direct communication links that give both Tracy and Gerry the support they need to run an effective programme for the golf course. Gerry advises on seed mixes and fertilisers to use and they discuss the regime together whenever necessary. She consults him as the person with the final say on dreaded course closures, but the fact that advice is freely given and received is a sign of mutual respect that seems to belie the sexist reputation of the private golf-club's environment.

Then again, Colin House, or Leeds City Council, or even Abbeydale Golf Club, may well not be typical of most employers of greenkeepers. The old argument that money and training would be wasted on women because they might become pregnant doesn't wash with them. They see the dedication their staff have shown, men and women, and let that speak for them. When Tracy Ruane says 'If I ever stop looking forward to going in to work in the morning, I'll go and do something else', you believe her. It is true though that, as she points out, greenkeeping has generally not been a job that women want to do: they usually have not been brought up to think they could or would want to do it. Lorna Tyson of Myerscough College is one who believes that there are young women around in greater numbers now who would genuinely benefit from increased opportunities to enter the profession. She is on the steering committee of the BTME and sees improving contacts with schools as a way of communicating the possibilities to young women choosing their careers.

In my conversations with Tracy and Gerry, we touched on the question of why it is widely held that such a job is no career for a woman. There are many women gardeners. They seem to have become acceptable earlier, and as Gerry points out, women often take an active, if not dominant, part in the gardening at home. While no-one would dare to suggest any more that greenkeepers are glorified gardeners, least of all the three women I spoke to who know all too well how false this is, it surely is not such a huge leap of the imagination for the stawlars who can accept the idea of women gardeners to accept women greenkeepers? Well, actually, it is. Golf tends to become a political thing, crystallising social attitudes. But things are changing. There will always be the stalwarts, male and female. The women all stress that they work in a man's world, that they have no illusions about trying to change attitudes on their own. They enjoy very good relations with the whole with their male colleagues, their employers and the male golfers out on the course. They do not seem to take a defensive attitude, do not in fact seem to have been obliged to do so. Gerry tells me that the golfers are nicer to them than they are to anyone.

Without the benefit of any hard evidence, it appears fair to assume that the changes in attitude originate in a greater appreciation of the skilled specialist that the greenkeeper is now seen to be. This and a less condescending and snobbish attitude on the part of golfers to what used to be termed a 'manual' or 'labouring' job must reflect a stronger concern for the health of the course itself than for 'propriety'.

And when it is realised how
Tests themselves go for analysis

energetically and effectively for women to carry out their task, and on top of that, how they love their work and take pride in the detail as well as the broader picture — several male greenkeepers have referred to the quality of the turf women give to their work out on the course — the confidence of the three employ- ers who have placed Gerry Wigeley, Tracy Ruane and Jane Ryan in positions of responsibility is utterly justified.

It is not that they are more shy than their male col- leagues. None is immodest enough to claim such a thing. It is, as Tracy explained, that although at times they may have had to work 110% to be 100% good, whereas a lad could work 90% to be seen to be just as good, they know they are as good, and they have proved it. When Tracy went to the BTME in January everybody shook her hand, people she'd never met, and everybody said things to prove it. When Tracy explained, that although at times they may have had to work 110% to be 100% good, whereas a lad could work 90% to be seen to be just as good, they know they are as good, and they have proved it. When Tracy went to the BTME in January everybody shook her hand, people she'd never met, and everybody said things to prove it.

To make any way forward there- fore, it is necessary for greenkeep- ers to have a realistic understanding of what testing can reveal about the course. From there it is possible to determine the most suitable test methods to provide the required information.

Stated simply, testing for the physical and nutritional properties of the rootzone is necessary to build up a record of the changes in those properties since the time of course construc- tion. The more comprehen- sive the analyses the clearer the associated chemical changes that can be made between a measured change and either an improvement or decline in the sports turf.

An analysis does not make judge- ment about how good or bad the condition of the rootzone is; this only happens when you compare the analysis with the quality of the turf. Testing is valid even when it shows that the rootzone does not meet the ideal textbook description.

This is quite common and it dem- onstrates that a combination of rootzone material, climate and turf species can adapt well despite con- trary opinion. But, however, one compo- nent of the rootzone undergoes change — as will invariably happen despite maintaining a constant management programme from year to year — then the change can be so significant as to throw the other fac- tors out of balance and a problem in the turf arises.

To illustrate this consider the fol- lowing scenario, one that may have happened when you compare the analysis with the quality of the turf. Testing is valid even when it shows that the rootzone does not meet the ideal textbook description.

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