Great Britain’s sports scene includes everything from bone-jarring rugby to afternoon lawn bowling with tea. The common thread? A love for natural grass playing surfaces

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Rivulets of perspiration stream down my back. Darn this blazing red wool sweater. Hot enough even without this coat.

Alternately jogging and walking in stiff wing-tips, the radiator boiling over in this surprising late-afternoon English sun, I realize he’s going to get a kick out of this. This is picture-book stuff.

Can you believe it, a lady’s tea party over a game of bowls (lawn bowling) in a public park bordering Nottingham University. The elderly women, hatted and bedecked in white finery, chatter like so many little birds on this warm fall afternoon. Ebony woods (oblong balls made of rockhard lignum vitae) litter the gutter-bounded court, a grass surface as smooth as a bridge table. Framing everything, tiers of manicured shrubbery.

“He” is Dr. Kent Kurtz, turfgrass professor at Cal-Poly University, my traveling partner, and, it’s dawning on me, my friend. Days in the same hotel rooms, the same cramped overnight sleeper, the same tiny rent-a-car will do that.

It’s that, or sharpened bunker rakes, toe to toe.

And “he,” chin on chest, is propped in a chair in the back of a lecture hall. The speaker at the National Turfgrass Council creeps into informational overdrive. Kurtz snoozes.

Can’t blame him really.

Nine days and dozens of faces rattled by like the clacking of that over-
night rail spring in a sleeper London's King Crossing to Edinburgh. That's the way to run a railroad: midnight and on time, tea and cookies before turning in too. Chalk up another 1,100 miles of open road in a rented Renault.

We were part of the 35,000 to kick tires at the massive IOG Trade Show in Windsor before fingerling turf at some of the finest lawn tennis facilities in London (and the world), and cruising cricket pitches on village greens.

With the sluggish Thames as a backdrop, diplomat's families putter on the immaculate grass bowling and croquet courts at exclusive Hurlingham, a private club. Hurlingham and its grass impressed us.

In brooding Edinburgh, massive Murrayfield Stadium, home of Scottish rugby, sat silent in the rain (nothing's as empty as a stadium without a game). The groundsman here coaxes the grass tall and healthy.

We shivered in Glascow's Ibrox Stadium as the hometown Rangers played listlessly in a game-long downpour and lost to visiting Dundee 2-0. This was soccer, world-class variety, and the grass was mowed shorter, the field surprisingly firm.

On this island, an island of gardens and games, the grass of a playing surface is important. Groundsmanship can be a respected life's work if not well paying. And universities teach groundsmanship; trade journals serve it. Both stress the technical in hand with the practical.

In Britain, where only two major stadiums sport synthetic turf, you don't just announce yourself as a groundsman.

Equidistant between Glascow and London, in tiny Bingley, is The Sports Turf Research Institute, a 64-year-old institution with new headquarters. Here grass is pampered then literally reduced to fibers to determine the best possible playing surfaces. This facility with a staff of 45 sells its services to sport and golf. It's virtually self sufficient.

These impressions will last. And this final one of the tanned, young groundsman waiting to care for the court in that Nottingham park as the women's club concluded its afternoon bowl.