

MONTE CARLO . . .

The friendly club in Europe's most exclusive resort, computer controls water saving

by Cedric Johns

Perched high on the rocky slopes of Mont. Agel, some eight hundred metres above the smooth Mediterranean and the sun drenched principality of Monaco, the Monte Carlo golf club provides a tranquil contrast to the hustle of the world famous resort from which the club takes its name.

At sea level, Monte Carlo presents a kaleidoscope of cosmopolitan interests. Its highly manicured parkland, colourful flowers and shrubs, vividly green lawns, sparkling fountains and palm trees provides a marked contrast to the historic Casino, the ultra-modern Lowes complex, some astonishing roof gardens, traditional French architecture, modern high rise office blocks, sophisticated underground shopping arcades and busy multi-level roadways - part of which forms the Formula I Grand Prix circuit.

At the City's hub, the Place du Casino bustles with life almost twenty four hours a day!

Viewed from a pavement table, at the internationally popular Cafe de Paris, you can sit, relax and literally watch the world saunter by, observe celebrities coming and going from the Hotel Paris one of Winston Churchill's retreats - or view the stream of shiny Mercedes, Porches, BMW's and Rolls Royces purring slowing around the central, palm shaded circular roadway.

On the nearby 'Rock', Prince Rainier's palace stands regal guard over the fine harbour, its calm blue waters reflecting the polished metal and gleaming white hulls of rows of luxurious yachts anchored within its walls.

Packed into a relatively small area of land, the principality is dominated by the mountain range which overlooks the coast-line from Menton to Nice. Towering upwards, the mountain's sun bleached rocky faces reach a high point where players, teeing off from the 14th, on the golf course can, peer over the edge and enjoy an eagles eye view of the city below . . .

But enough of the travelogue! Let me tell you about the Monte Carlo course and how an Englishman has helped to give the club a technological lead in the art of greenkeeping.

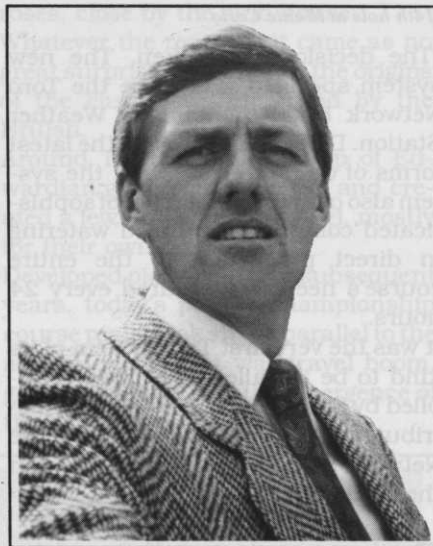
Just over three years ago Mike Mer-

rick was following a typically homespun career as a greenkeeper. Learning his trade on the Worthing and Beaconsfield courses, Mike was appointed head greenkeeper, at the Stratford-on-Avon club in 1986. Then fate stepped in.

George Shiels, who had been advising the Monte Carlo club on greenkeeping matters, offered Mike Merrick the chance to take over this particular role - on a part-time basis.

Ostensibly visiting Monte Carlo to discuss and agree this arrangement, Mike was suddenly confronted with a totally unexpected situation.

"The objective of my meeting was to finalise plans for a week's advisory stay on a quarterly basis. I was to advise the course foreman and his team of the finer points of golf course preparation and management", Mike



Mike Merrick "Le Boss" at Monte Carlo

told me.

Instead, the discussions took on a completely new dimension when Harry Rey, the Monte Club captain, suddenly looked up and offered Mike the position of head greenkeeper - permanently!

This to say the least, was something of a conversation stopper. Pausing for a few moments to collect his thoughts, Mike followed his convictions and agreed.

"Having committed myself, I later had the questionable pleasure of spending the whole of my 90 minutes flight back

to London considering the implications!", said Mike with a grin.

And what implications. Mike had not even had time to consult his wife, Mandy. He didn't speak French and he had never worked outside the UK, never mind look after a mountain-side course.

A five week evening crash course in French, a frantic rush to complete all the necessary arrangements plus a family Christmas gathering provided little time for second thoughts!

Following Henry Rey's advice to "bring nothing but yourselves", the Merricks arrived on the Cote d'Azur, in January 1987.

Looking back to that momentous day, Mike says that as far as he (and Mandy) was concerned it was the right decision. "I had found the challenge I was looking for."

Responsibility? "That was rather unnerving" says Mike. "I had no one to guide me, no greens committee chairman to talk to, (there isn't a greens committee) it was all down to me!" Absorbing himself totally, Mike's immediate task was to improve his French, educate his assistants to his way of doing things and set them work schedules.

The first job Mike handed out was cutting and shaping all 18 holes so that, in his words, the combination of tees, greens, fairways and rough looked like a golf course.

That accomplished, they then set about improving the course generally, and in particular, preparing it for the June '87 'Johnny Walker' PGA tournament. Leading by example, "Le Boss", as Mike is known locally, established himself by demonstrating that he would and could tackle any job he asked his team to carry out.

At the end of his first year Mike's team had learned much, they had reacted to his enthusiasm, they could see the improvement in the course themselves. The second year of Mike Merrick's development plans for the Monte Carlo golf course majored on the provision of an up-to-date irrigation system.

Initial discussions had started halfway through Mike's first year on the course because, as he described it,



Sylvan setting. The tree lined approaches to the par 3 14th hole at Monte Carlo

"The existing system was nothing more than a hotch-potch of Rainbird Weathermatic, Perrott and Toro sprinklers and equipment - 1988 was to be the year of the irrigation system."

Water, or the lack of it at some 2,600 feet above sea level was (and still is) a big problem. Supplied by a local water company who have the right to switch off supplies at their discretion, conservation of resources was upper most in Mike's thoughts. "How, he asked, can we best utilise what initial water we have . . ."

The upshot of a series of deliberations between Mike, the brothers Rey and other members of the Monte Carlo club's management committee ended with invitations to Rainbird and Toro to submit designs, costings and recommendations.

"Give or take the odd embellishment, both submissions were identical" says Mike. "So we carried out a final analysis breaking down each related factor - good points and bad points, the pro's and the con's with an emphasis on ease of control."

"On a personal note, I voted for the Toro system because of the considerate, helpful and knowledgeable advice I had previously been given by both the Toro Irrigation and mower people that I had worked with back in England."

"The decision was taken, The new system specified was to be the Toro Network 8000 including a Weather Station. Designed to provide the latest forms of data electronically, the system also offered the benefits of sophisticated 'computer controlled' watering in direct proportion to the entire course's needs - measured every 24 hours.

It was the very first Toro system of its kind to be installed in Europe. Supplied by Sadimato, the Toro Sales distributor for France, installation of the Network 8000 system commenced in the September of '87.

In the event, the installation of the high technological elements involved in the system provided a number of technical headaches. "I think we all learned something during the installation period - after all, we were pioneering electronics of the type not seen on a European golf course before" commented Mike.

"I learned a great deal about computerisation and automated electronic systems during the installation period - so did my assistants. As the 1988 PGA tournament drew ever closer, we mucked in to help complete much of the work. It was an invaluable experience."

"The high-tech. back up we received

from Toro - mainly through European Sales Director, Carlos Ochoa, and Technical Service Manager, Mark Gunter was tremendous.

"Mark helped commission the system shortly before the 'pro-tournament was due to begin and then, would you believe it, it rained so heavily we didn't need to use the system - at that moment in time."

What, I asked Mike Merrick, did he think of the Network 8000 system after a full season's use on the Monte Carlo course?

"It is a very fine management tool - to my way of thinking it is the way forward - yes, even for club's in Northern Europe including the UK," he told me. "The weather station really does a great job of measuring soil moisture. It eliminates for example, the risk of over watering which in turn substantially reduces the casual introduction of undesirable grasses on greens and equally important in my case, the close control of watering enables me to utilise very limited resources to better effect".

"Here on Mont Agel, I have some 220,000 gallons of water at my disposal. I really need twice that amount but Network 8000 does a great job of helping me use limited supplies to maximum effect."

"Before the system was installed I

estimated that my fairways required 15 minutes watering per night. Network 8000 tells me that 13 minutes will do the job - these two minutes gives me 3,000 extra gallons to play with. Over seven nights that's 21,000 gallons of water for use on other parts of the course!."

"Last year I printed out a full 12 months data provided by the weather station covering wind speed, wind direction, rainfall, humidity and solar radiation. Relating these factors to daily temperatures measured in the autumn and spring enabled me to work out a useful guide to temperature ranges affecting over-seeding or top-dressing."

"Having said that, it is my opinion that the most important factor which I, as a greenkeeper, should take notice of is solar radiation."

"In my experience, solar radiation has a critical influence on evapotranspiration and the need for watering - much more so than allowing for rainfall. You can hear, see and feel rain but solar radiation? At best one can hazard a guess on the basis of direct sunlight or cloudy bright or dull conditions. The Network 8000 weather station eliminates guesswork, it measures solar radiation accurately - and has often provided answers that I've not expected."

"I've learned for example, that a clear hot sunny day can produce a lower solar radiation/ET rate while low cloud plus high solar radiation can reverse the situation."

"In real terms and with some eighteen months experience of the Network 8000 under his belt, Mike claims that he is now able to use limited water resources to maximum effect. I calculate that I am saving 25% of water at my disposal yet getting 50% more effective coverage because of the system."



Reaching for the sky. A Toro 690 in action against a rugged backdrop looking towards Chateauneuf

When walking the Monte Carlo course I must say that I immediately felt at home. Perhaps it was the sight of so many fine evergreen oaks, silver birch and pine trees which fringe the sloping boundaries and fairways. Maybe it was the glint of autumnal leaves dancing across the green turf - a mixture of rye grass and fescues - or the surprise of finding late blooming roses, close by the club house.

Whatever the reasons, it came as no great surprise to learn that the origins of the club were influenced by the British.

Around 1911, a small group of Edwardian golfers got together and created a few holes on Mont Agel, mostly for their own amusement.

Developed piecemeal over subsequent years, today's par 71 championship course really took shape parallel to the advent of the post war travel boom, golfing holidays and the emergence of the PGA tournament circuit.

Taken under the wing of the Societe des Bains de Mer, the club consolidated throughout the sixties and seventies. Now under the guiding hand of club president, M. Jean-Charles Rey, a lawyer, the Monte Carlo club currently has over 400 members.

This figure is more than doubled by the constant stream of visitors of all nationalities who turn up to play each year.

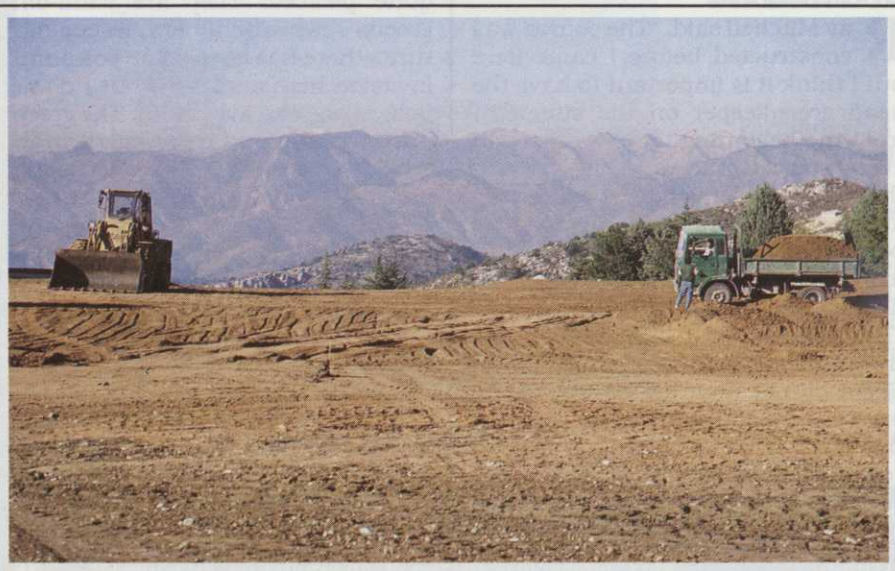
Competitions-including medals, stablefolds and inter play tournaments feature throughout a full and busy twelve months club programme. Events reach a climax each year when the Monte Carlo 'Open' draws the worlds top pros to the course.

During the winter months, the British influence in the shape of Bob Halsall is evident on the course. Now an active 74, Bob comes over from Royal Birkdale where he started his professional career as a caddie, to teach the finer points of the game to ardent admirers. He also teaches at the Monaco Golf School.

Bob, I am told, has been making this journey for over forty years. At the time, Henry Cotton used to add his experience to Bob's depth of knowledge! That was before Portugal lured Henry away.

Yes, I quickly felt at home when visiting Monte Carlo - it is that sort of club. Can you imagine sitting down to lunch in the clubhouse with the club's head greenkeeper and his wife for company? I did, and very enjoyable it was!

In contrast, the club does not take kindly to members who fail to replace divots. If spotted, an automatic three months suspension is imposed. Visitors? Their green fees are returned and they are gently shown the door.



Danger, men at work! Because of surface rock, the 10th was remodelled under the direction of Mike Merrick to eliminate this problem . . .