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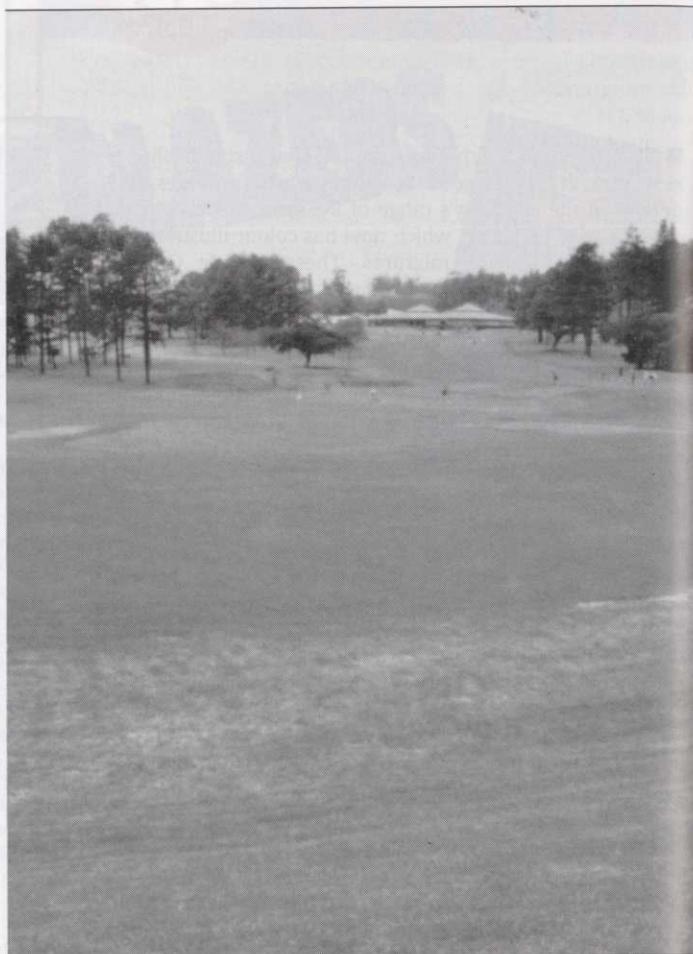
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# SOUTH AFRICA

From Surrey to a climate altogether sunnier... LES ADAMS explains how greenkeeping practices are different, and how some stay the same, in a country five times the size of the UK, when showers bring 50mm of water in 20 minutes

I live in Durban, a coastal town in South Africa where miles of golden beaches are pounded by the Indian Ocean.

I left England in 1983 with my wife and two children in search of sunshine and some essential warm weather to improve the health of my eldest son. I had been employed in greenkeeping for over ten years, the last six years as course manager at Leatherhead Golf Club in Surrey, and I am now course manager at Mount Edgecombe Country Club, a picturesque parkland course 3km from the sea and

18km north of Durban. We have two bowling greens, squash courts, four tennis courts, a large swimming pool and a clubhouse which has two bars and two dining rooms. The Club has a membership of just under 2000, approximately 900 of these being golfing members, and we average around 50,000 rounds of golf each year. An old friend in England asked me to write about my greenkeeping experiences in South Africa, which has prompted this epistle.

South Africa is a big country, five times the size of the UK, therefore with many different climatic conditions. I have worked in both Durban and Johannesburg and will write a little about both these areas.

Durban's climate is sub-tropical with average summer temperatures in the mid-30s and humidity almost as high as Florida in the USA. Night temperatures in Durban in summer drop only a few degrees below those of the day time, and if an off-shore wind (known as a Berg wind) blows, it can actually get hotter. Because of this, cool season grasses do not survive and warm season grasses are grown, *Cynodon* (or Bermuda as it is known in the USA) being the most popular.

Course management is more related to southern locations in the USA, although basic principals of cultural practices are the same anywhere. Warm season grasses are stoloniferous or rhizomal in growth habit (sometimes both) and colonise open ground very quickly. *Cynodon* grows towards the sun and forms what is known as grain, which creates different putting speeds – putting down grain being much faster than against the grain. Verti-cutting and topdressing are the main ways to control and minimise grain and must be done very regularly. Grooming reels are now available which can be used daily.

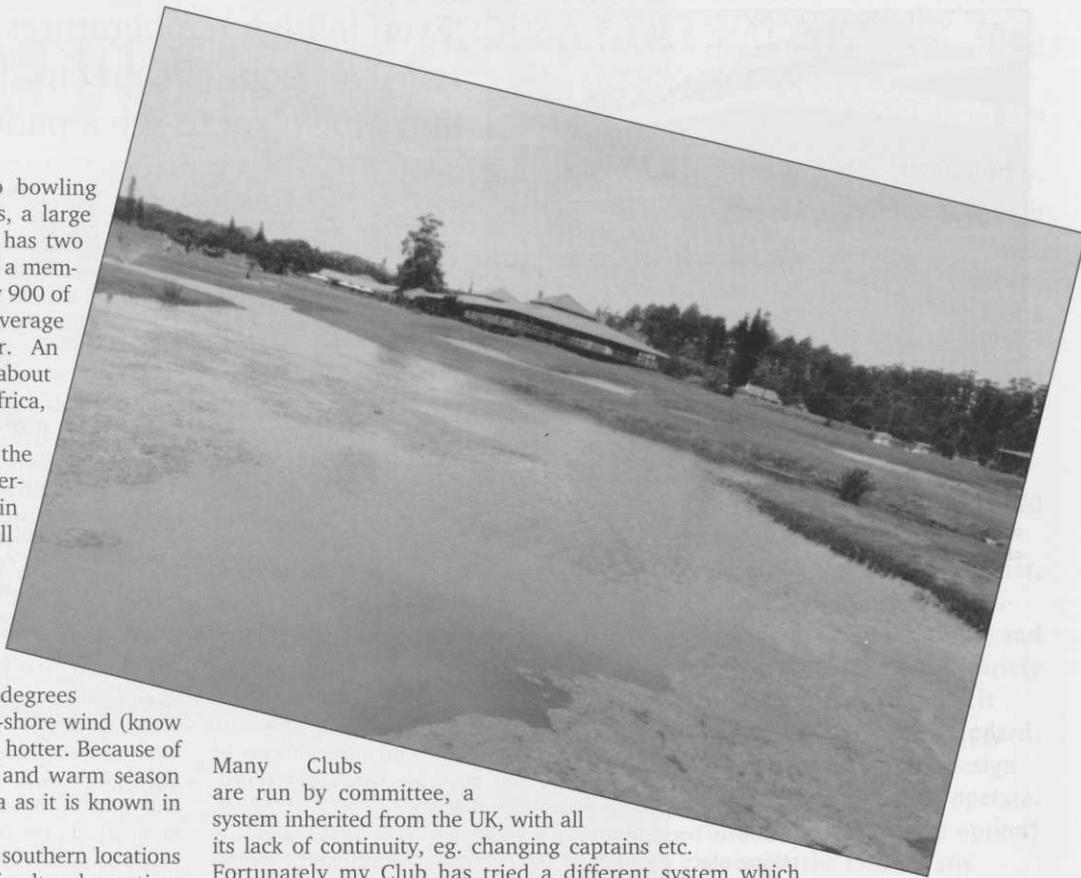
Because of the rate of growth and toughness of the grass it is general practice to try to cut the entire course, including rough, every day during the summer. Greens are generally double cut seven days a week during times of peak growth.

I now have a much better understanding of the reason why courses in the USA have larger budgets than those in the UK. For a start; staff levels are much higher. As an example, we have a total of 30 staff employed to maintain the golf course, bowling greens and gardens. Such work requires a great deal of machinery to cut the entire course each day, for remember; the grass grows for 9-10 months of the year. This leaves little time for machinery maintenance and to overcome this most top Clubs have considerable back-up machinery, which once again adds to the budget.

Jacobson, Toro, Ransomes, Scott Bonar and Kubota machines are all available in South Africa, as are Ford, Massey Ferguson and John Deere tractors, but prices are high. A triplex greens mower for example, costs around R50,000 and I sometimes think we course managers have to be extraordinary salesmen to convince committees to pay this amount of money for a greens mower, especially when a Toyota Corolla with air-conditioning, electric windows and power steering costs only R45,000.

A sophisticated irrigation system is essential in South Africa, especially in the winter months when days are sunny and warm (mid-20s) and rain is not expected for weeks. Frost is unheard of in Durban, with the lowest night temperature around 5 degrees centigrade and the most miserable days between 15 and 20 degrees centigrade.

We have recently installed a computerised irrigation system capable of putting one million litres of water on the course in 12 hours. Our irrigation water is stored in two large lakes, which are features of the course and fed by a small river. Most Clubs are not so fortunate and rely entirely on borehole water, which is both costly to extract and has to be stored in man-made reservoirs.



#### Many Clubs

are run by committee, a system inherited from the UK, with all its lack of continuity, eg. changing captains etc.

Fortunately my Club has tried a different system which seems to work reasonably well. We have an executive committee of five members from which the chairman and vice chairman are elected. They also form the nucleus of the financial committee and are responsible for all major decisions affecting the Club. The Club captains, both male and female, are co-opted onto this committee for their term of office and attend mainly to keep the members up to date with committee policies. I report directly to the chairman, who has held his position for almost ten years. Should the present chairman decide to retire, his place would be taken by the vice chairman; who has also been involved for several years and is fully aware of the policy we have been following since I joined the Club. This creates continuity and stability within the club and is more settling for the staff than the annual or bi-annual changes of committee I have experienced in the past. Just out of interest, Leatherhead was run on similar lines and was also a pleasant working environment.

Johannesburg is a city on a land plateau known as the reef, which is almost 6000 feet above sea level. It has an average rainfall of 700mm and an evaporation level of over 1500mm. Rainfall is almost entirely in the summer months and is usually in the form of afternoon thunderstorms. Because of the altitude, temperatures are usually below 30°C day-time and night temperatures drop considerably. This makes it possible to grow some cool season grasses under good management and bent grass is widely used on the greens throughout the reef, with excellent results.

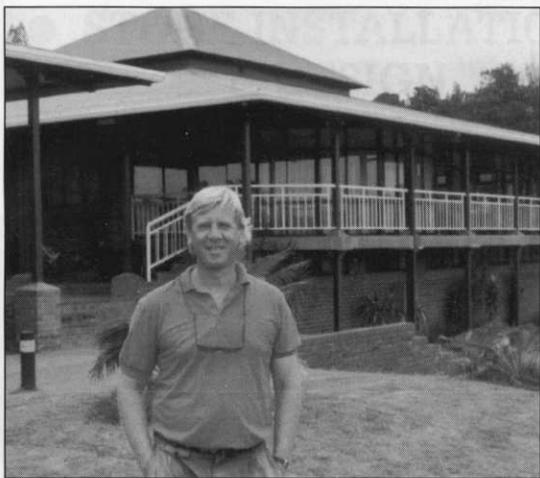
Turf grass diseases such as Brown Patch, *Helminthosporium* and Pythium Blight are all a problem, but the biggest problem appears to be invasion by *Poa annua*. Tests are under way with a selective herbicide, and these show some promising results, but it will be sometime before the product is registered; even if successful.

*Poa annua* can be controlled in Bermuda grass with a chemical called Promamide, which is usually used as a pre-emergent, but unfortunately the chemical damages bent grass and I would imagine that it would also damage fescue.

Because of its altitude and lack of cloud cover during winter nights, Johannesburg has moderate frost from May until August and although day temperatures are high, even bent grass does not grow much during these months. Pitch mark damage becomes a serious problem, as the number of rounds played is high during this time. Some course managers are experimenting with very high applications of

**Above: Clubhouse, built in 1990 following a fire at the old clubhouse, with 18th green and water feature.**

**Left: A view of the clubhouse from the back of 17th green. The green was opened for play just five months ago.**



Les Adams in front of the new clubhouse

'Even in high temperatures I only irrigate once or twice a week. The greens drain exceptionally well and I have yet to see a puddle on them'

► Nitrogen throughout the winter, an idea which came from Israel, a country which has a similar climate.

Results so far have been interesting, with an increase in growth and surprisingly little increase in disease, but it is too

early to draw any conclusions as yet. Education for greenkeepers is almost entirely supplied by their own association, but a technical college in Pretoria does offer a Diploma course in Turfgrass Management, which is a definite step in the right direction.

Greenkeepers – or course managers as they are now called – are almost all Europeans, working with Asian or African staff. There is a serious shortage of trained greenkeepers, with only few Clubs having European assistants gaining experience. Thus golf Clubs rely on horticulturists or mechanics to fill those vacant positions caused by retirement or for any new course construction.

Golf is becoming very popular and new development is taking place throughout the country. Unfortunately, due to the shortage of trained course managers, standards are dropping. Salaries are increasing quite quickly in Johannesburg and also in some parts of Durban and it is hoped that with a change in policy by the Clubs and the increased pay structure, more educated people will be encouraged to join the industry.

South Africa is a beautiful country which is in the middle

of huge political changes. How these changes will affect our lives we really do not know. If it wasn't for the 'wind of change' I would recommend that the more adventurous young course manager come and make a career in the sunshine.

As a past member of the BGGGA executive way back in the 1970s, I must congratulate BIGGA on the tremendous forward strides that they have made in the past few years – well done! I must also say how much I enjoy reading Greenkeeper International – keep up the good work.

● *The author is course manager of the Mount Edgecombe Country Club, in Durban, South Africa. He also acts as a consultant at the Royal Durban Club and is involved in advisory work on new course maintenance and construction.*

● *As a postscript to the above, Les Adams wrote again most recently: The days just fly past at the moment, it's almost scary. We are in the middle of a huge re-vamp of the course and the pressure is on to open four more new greens, making eight new ones so far with another five almost ready and only two left to construct, leaving me with 30 greens to maintain at present – it's really quite hectic.*

Out of interest, we have built our greens to the USGA Spec., and contrary to popular belief, these do not need huge amounts of water. In fact, if constructed properly, a perched water table is formed and even in Durban's high temperatures I only irrigate once or twice a week. The greens do, however, drain exceptionally well and I have yet to see a puddle on them – even after the heaviest of downpours, eg 50mm in 20 minutes – a typical Durban storm!

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