

When you first think of Sweden, you may not necessarily think of it as a leading golfing country. It might therefore surprise you to learn that Sweden boasts the biggest golfing nation in Europe outside of the British Isles when compared to its total population.

Sweden has a population of approximately 8 million people and right now there are about 325,000 golfers. There are around 320 courses, representing around 1000+ members per course, which is a very high number when compared with Great Britain. The first Swedish golf club was founded in 1902 and not surprising it was the British who first brought the idea of golf to our attention. The Swedish Golf Federation was founded in 1904.

#### The golfing season in Sweden

It will probably also surprise you to learn that several courses can be played year round on regular greens. Of course this is only possible in the southern part of Sweden and also on the western coastline up through Gothenburg. The latitude of the southern part of our country is about the same as that of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Conversely, the northern most golf course is about 2000 km north of that (approx. 1200 miles), the course being a 9-hole layout that sometimes does not open until the last week in June and closes during the first part of September. There is a bonus, however, in that on three such courses golfers can play 24 hours a day under the midnight sun.

In the north we find several problems in maintaining golf courses, educating greenkeepers and so on, since the circumstances are so very different. However, most of Sweden's courses are situated in the southernmost third of the country, where the golf season and maintenance programmes are most similar to northern Britain, rather than extremes found in north of Sweden.

#### Grass species

All the familiar species known to flourish in cool season countries may be found in Sweden. Looking specifically at our greens, we have a major problem with *Poa annua*, which we try to fight; live with, and fight again – but we still have it! We look toward traditional British greenkeeping practices in introducing more fescue and bent species on our greens, with the most popular mixture for seeding being approx. 90-95% red fescue and 5-10% bent grass. Creeping bent is sometimes used, but this is not as dominant as the mixture. We have also witnessed some courses being seeded with pure bent grass, and I guess in these cases they are convinced that they have used the only right thing!

Tees are generally seeded with fescue-bent and fairways either with fescue-bent or Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*). Rye-grass is not used very much, unless somebody wants to effect a very quick repair on some areas.

#### Machinery trends

Ransome, Jacobsen and Toro are the biggest brands, though of course we have many other machines, mainly imported from GB or the USA. Greens are usually mown with triplex ride-ons, though some greenkeepers use walk-behind mowers for big tournaments. Tees and aprons are also mown with triplex greens mowers or other fine cutting machines. Fairway are cut with Ransomes 350's or similar, though we now see quite a few courses changing over from 7-gang tractor-pulled fairway mowers to 5-gang self-propelled machines. The new generation of light mowers for fairways have also found their way into our country and these will no doubt soon find great popularity.

Machinery used on Swedish golf courses is generally quite new and modern. We are also fortunate in having pretty good storage buildings and workshops for maintenance. I think that Swedish

# Golf 24 hours a day, in the land of midnight sun



STIG PERSSON on greenkeeping in Sweden

greenkeepers would rather ride than walk, so we have many transportation vehicles!

#### Crews, wages and the cost of living

Generally a 18-hole course will have between two and five full-time staff, supplemented in the season with temporary workers as an average 5-7000 working hours for a 18-hole course is quite right.

Working time in Sweden is typically 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. All other work is overtime and it is not unusual for several hundred hours of overtime to be logged annually in order to mow greens seven days a week, change the holes and all those other jobs that have to be done, not least on Saturdays and Sundays.

Working titles in Sweden are similar to those in Britain: We are using the English title for the head greenkeeper and use a Swedish translation for course manager. In addition, those persons known in the English tongue as greenkeepers are known similarly, though this also is translated into Swedish.

Wages in Sweden are, I think, more uniform than in Great Britain, though it is always difficult to relate wages and other differentials from one country to another, especially as tax programmes, insurance and many other things are different. One thing is very common though, everybody thinks they pay too much in taxes! Living expenses are high in Sweden, especially for the basics of life like food and beverages.

#### How is golf organised in Sweden?

Sweden has always shown a great interest in being properly organised, of that there is no doubt when one looks at how our golfers, golf courses and golf clubs are organised. Every golfer is registered as a member of the Swedish Golf Federation through their club; and we have no real municipal golf courses. The first pay-and-play course has opened close to Gothenburg and in the Federation there is a programme for expanding and/or creating alternative golf course constructions. These can be Par 3 courses, or driving ranges with possibilities for changing practising direction; length, and so on. The tables show how we are organised.

#### The Swedish Greenkeepers Association

In 1978 the Swedish Greenkeepers Association was formed, and everybody who works on a golf course can be a member. Today the SGA has

more than 700 members and is second only to BIGGA as the biggest greenkeepers association in Europe. Our SGA works very closely with the Green Section of the Swedish Golf Federation in all programmes concerning the education of greenkeepers, chairmen of green committees, constructors and so on. The Green Section has eight advisers/agronomists in different regions and every golf course in Sweden is entitled to at least one free visit from their agronomist each year. This is paid for through a subscription made to the Federation by every club member, a fee of about £10 per year. Our Swedish agronomists are also involved as teachers at those colleges which have greenkeeper education programmes, as well as giving lectures and presentations at conferences and seminars promoted by both the Swedish Greenkeepers Association and the Swedish Golf Federation.

#### Our own greenkeeping magazine

Greenbladet is a magazine for Swedish greenkeepers that is issued four times a year and has 56-60 pages, mostly 4-colour. The magazine was founded by me and I am the editor. The aim is for the Swedish Greenkeepers Association to head the magazine from 1993. It is, of course, written in Swedish and thus its only readership interest outside Sweden is in the Scandinavian countries. Each issue has a circulation of 3000 copies.

#### The international connection

We have found over the years that we have much to learn from British greenkeepers (maybe something to bring back), so we have tried to participate in your programmes at conferences and meetings. Not surprisingly, we enjoy a very close and positive relationship with BIGGA. We also try to get international speakers to our conferences and thus far we have enlisted the skills of Jimmy Kidd, Jack McMillan, Eric Shiel and Neil Thomas, all of whom have visited Sweden as speakers. We have also been represented several times at BIGGA conferences and we think this is a good way of transferring experience from one country to another.

In many ways we can see that golf course maintenance is very much the same – with the same joys and sorrows – all over the world. We all belong to the wonderful greenkeeping world!

◆ The author, Stig Persson, is the editor of Greenblat, the magazine for Swedish and Scandinavian greenkeepers.