

# IT'S GIRLS' WORK TOO

Most men find themselves dwarfed by Tracy Ruane. Not that 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 Costessey (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 Armsley, 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 beats gardening hands down.' She asked to be allowed to stay on in greenkeep-

**How come that Britain has only two female head greenkeepers? MAJA MIHAJLOVIC examines the changing attitude towards women on the golf course**

ing for her third year. The apprenticeship involved rotating from year to year between gardening in parks, greenkeeping, arboriculture and work on the tree gangs with, finally, a year in nursery work, but instead of going onto the third stage she was sent to Temple Newsham 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 lads 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 bad-

gered 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.



Tracy Ruane: 'I have not been discriminated against at all'

'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 unshakable 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 with 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 the relaxed and productive relations they have with them. 'My management don't isolate themselves from the workers, which is nice, they come out onto the course and they know their ideas.'

Tracy has four men in her team. The oldest is 51, the youngest 21, the others in their mid-20s. The course in their care is a new one



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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 other buildings to a multi-star hotel and leisure complex.



**Jane Ryan: badgered the committee until they took her on**

Hence her excitement at being involved in the scheme from so near the beginning. It is an excitement which she thinks she has been able to communicate to 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, where she worked for eight years. His fairness, the way he listened to his staff, giving them credit where due and never pulling rank – these are the principles she brings to her style of management. She admits having had to steel her nerves at times before giving instructions, especially at the beginning when she didn't know her staff. She gives much of the credit for getting it right to Eric Garlick, but she is helped in this by a considerable amount of personal charm. If her lads come to her all the time now with ideas and suggestions and discuss work over breakfast, lunch and tea instead of reading the paper, it is a symptom of the trust they have in her and the enthusiasm for the job she has managed to pass on.

Already they are beginning to feel they are achieving high standards; Another municipal course nearby had to close after six weeks of rain – they were able to

keep Oulton open. 'I've managed to excite my management with the idea that we can do it, because I think they started to think, 'What are we going to do with Oulton? It's just hassle, a lost cause...' It's a really good feeling because I know it's going to happen, I have full confidence, and my lads do now – we know we can do it.'

Asked about golf and the playing of the game, both Tracy and Gerry add their voices to the debate on the side of non golfing greenkeepers. They do play, though unenthusiastically, and sometimes, according to Gerry, downright bad temperedly. As she puts it: 'Being a greenkeeper doesn't make you a better golfer, and being a good golfer doesn't make a better greenkeeper. I'm sure that there are excellent golfers that are greenkeepers but I think that too much playing the game takes away something of the art of the greenkeeper.'

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 Costessey, which is a private club owned and run by the developer, but the team of four men, Ray included, have a similarly co-operative and understanding relationship based on a good team spirit – something of a family atmosphere. The age range is very similar to that of 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 Costessey 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 policy. They are both ambitious for the best, working closely together, and she thinks that, as someone who had no experience of golf course development before Costessey, '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 stalwarts 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 on 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,



**Gerry Wigley: intensive and in-depth education**

do not in fact seem to have been obliged to do so. Gerry tells me that the golfers are nicer to her 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 in for analysis

energetically and effectively these women 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 finish women give to their work out on the course – the confidence of the three employers who have placed Gerry Wigley, Tracy Ruane and Jane Ryan in positions of responsibility is utterly justified.

It is not that they are more able than their male colleagues. 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 then she was introduced to the Duke of York, she knew she'd achieved something unexpected, and it has left her – and her employers – riding on the crest of a wave.

In her own words, 'When I was made head greenkeeper I thought, wow, this is brilliant, I'm dancing! I'm still dancing, I still keep having to tell myself. But just look what's happened in the last six months: I've been in every paper, I've been on television, I've met the Duke of York, I mean, my God! And the pride the Council have now, it's really good, I mean, good for us all – for me, for the lads and for the managers'. And, I would suggest, for women in green-keeping.

It is sure that the congratulations she received extend equally to Gerry, who has been steadily working away as head greenkeeper in Costessey for about a year now, and it is equally sure that other women greenkeepers can take heart from this mark of official recognition by the figureheads of the industry.

■ The author, Maja Mihajlovic, is a freelance journalist with a special interest in golf course architecture and fine turf maintenance.

**T**o test or not to test! This is the clear option being presented to greenkeepers by some of the leading commentators in the sports turf industry. Articles in various magazines over the last few months have been either very supportive or very critical of physical and chemical analyses. However, the whole issue is being made more complicated because these commentators are confusing the purpose of testing with the methods and interpretation of analyses.

It is unreasonable to maintain the view that testing has no relevance to a greenkeeper's planning because of an experience with poor and erratic results produced by difficult and inappropriate test procedures. Nor is it reasonable to make claims for testing that owe more to the experience of the greenkeeper in developing the right management strategy for their course.

To make any way forward therefore, it is necessary for greenkeepers 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 construction. The more comprehensive the analyses the clearer the association that can be made between a measured change and either an improvement or decline in the sports turf.

An analysis does not make judgement 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 an ideal textbook description.

This is quite common and it demonstrates that a combination of rootzone material, climate and turf species can adapt well despite contrary opinion. If however, one component 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 factors out of balance and a problem in the turf arises.

To illustrate this consider the following scenario, one that may have applied to many courses during the recent prolonged spell of rain. These saturated, cool conditions

lead to a substantial loss of nitrogen as volatile ammonia, and the subsequent imbalance of carbon to nitrogen reduces the manufacture of organic acids in the soil solution.

Less acid activity and lower soil oxygen combine to cause precipitation of nutrients such as copper, zinc, iron, manganese and calcium as insoluble compounds, whilst potassium and manganese are washed through the profile. There may be an increase of a whole pH unit. As a consequence the greenkeeper may observe either a promotion of a less desirable grass or weed species, an increased persistence of disease, or just a general decline of the quality of the turf cover.

It will be obvious to take measures that improve aeration and if necessary correct compaction, but testing would almost certainly be required to show the degree of change in the pH and nutritional status that normal management practices do not easily correct.

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## 'Enthusiasm for testing is not often matched by expertise of many labs'

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To carry this a step further, the justification for testing and recommending rootzone materials at the start of construction is because we can make some predictions about the way they are likely to change in the early years of the course and thus hopefully begin the management with fewer headaches.

The enthusiasm for testing, however, is often not matched by the expertise of many labs conducting such work and this is where the whole issue comes crashing down.

If our industry intends to follow the American example by testing and recommending suitable rootzone material, then we should be aware of some of the problems that can arise from test procedures as laid down by the USGA.

The methods for determining bulk density and particle size analysis have been long established and there should be no problem in obtaining reasonable reproducibility either by the same lab or by different labs provided they have competent technicians.

The testing for hydraulic properties of the rootzone, which has been the cause of the apparent unreliability of physical analyses to date, can

be easily resolved by substitution for a range of simpler and more accurate procedures.

Chemical analysis appears to be poorly understood by many people in both greenkeeping and the laboratory services. This is obvious because of the emphasis placed on soils as opposed to tissue analysis. To illustrate, let me take up the cause of one well known critic of chemical analysis on the question of suitable phosphorus levels in the soil.

Most of the phosphorus fertiliser applied to soil is very quickly taken out of the soil water solution by forming insoluble compounds with calcium, iron and aluminium components present. Thus if a soluble extract of the soil is analysed it will obviously show very low concentrations of this nutrient.

In reality the soil needs to have a relatively high concentration of phosphorus because plants obtain this nutrient by conducting a series of complex acid reactions in the near vicinity of the roots, a very small area which is quickly depleted. If phosphorus was available only in levels indicated by the soluble extract then it would be unlikely that many soils would support a sports turf.

Tissue analysis however, is a reliable way of showing the availability of nutrients at a given time and by comparing the analyses of similar turf samples it is a much easier way of establishing the range of nutrient concentrations, and therefore fertilizer applications, that are required to support good growth.

Soils analyses should be used to determine if the levels of nutrients are accumulating to a point where inhibition of the extraction of other nutrients becomes possible. This is often the reason for the apparent deficiency of manganese and molybdenum.

In summary therefore, any greenkeeper who has lost confidence in the capacity of physical or chemical analyses should be consoled by the fact that there are both test procedures and experts who can make testing a cost effective and meaningful exercise.

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