

Doug McClymont, estates manager of the Elephant Hills Golf Course, Zimbabwe, describes the joys of managing a golf course where big game hunting begins in the air...

So you think
You've got
PROBLEMS?

Living with a pain in the grass

The article which appeared in Greenkeeper International March '93 touched a very tender spot. The only missing link at our course here in Zimbabwe is the Marx Brothers – we have every other ingredient essential for an excellent comedy-cum-farce.

Ever since the old Elephant Hills Hotel was 'shot down' by a SAM Seven anti-aircraft missile – the only hotel in the world to be shot down in full flight, as the heat-seeking device locked neatly on to the hotel kitchen chimney – the adjoining Elephant Hills Golf Course has been a source of some amusement and much comment.

The old course, laid out by Gary Player, was over 7,000 metres long with each nine holes requiring what seemed like a three-day safari. The new masters of the new Elephant Hills Hotel complex decided to make things a little easier and appointed a committee to design a shorter course. This was done according to plan and the new course design is excellent.

Enter the substitute Marx Brothers, stage left! The construction was placed in the hands of an engineer and sub-contractors whose experience hitherto had related only to landscaping small gardens. All soil samples were sent to the sampling laboratory at the Ministry of Roads and decisions were made on their analyses alone. Needless to say, the Ministry of Roads sample soils essentially to determine how best they can be compacted – and that is why we have the most compactible soils in the world on our greens.

The person who laid out the greens was a real brain surgeon and the engineer was in much the same class, having written figures on the plan without identifying measurement units. This resulted in the first two greens being constructed with humps and hollows laid out in metres rather than centimetres and with the first green being cleared to almost three hectares before someone noticed and called halt! Each diagram was separately drawn without reference to corresponding diagrams and none displayed a northern compass point. When I arrived I discovered six greens facing backwards. As one golfer pointed out, this made stopping the ball somewhat akin to pitching off the tail-board of a station wagon whilst hoping to stick the ball on the bonnet.

Tees were another huge joke. All par three tees were carefully landscaped to face down toward the green and were laid out for a full surface area of 5m x 5m. Fairways were carefully graded for the length of the hole but were not planed (the engineer in charge insisting that a land plane was the same as a tractor-mounted mini-grader) so that all Elephant Hills fairways have 10cm ridges running along their length. Mowing with a five-gang Jacobsen means that we have light rough on our fairways (in strips) about every two metres.

The unwashed bunker sand (chosen by the engineer whilst on a fishing trip up the Zambesi River) was laid 4cm deep in every bunker. It was analysed recently and to our great joy we found it corresponded to just 20% of the STRI spec, though in truth we had expected it to meet



less than 5% of the requirements. The smaller fraction has eroded and blocked all the drains, leaving precious little sand above the 'engineer-designed' polypropylene bags into which the graded gravel etcetera was enclosed for bunker drainage. The local polypropylene is almost waterproof, so how he imagined the water would drain through, heaven only knows. Being a conservation conscious person, he also planted the water hazards (eleven of our holes have water) with sedges and chobe papyrus and within three months there was no surface water – all the hazards had filled with vegetation.

We have a fully computerised GAL irrigation system with Hunter pop-up sprinklers. Following planting the engineer insisted that the whole course should be watered every day, as he didn't want the

course to look blue when viewed from the hotel. When I arrived, root growth had established only to about 5cms and it has taken nearly a year to get the root system decently established. The system introduced to mow the greens was totally flummoxing – it took each mower nearly three hours to creep across each green. This caused such a problem that in order to cope, more mowing machines were indented for. This has been fine for me, for with extra machines I now have plenty of spares, which in this corner of the globe is vital as spare parts availability is undoubtedly one of our bigger problems. How envious we are when we see those magical adverts in Greenkeeper International for Toro, Sisis, Ransomes, John Deere, Hardi, Kubota and the like. Most of our stuff is home produced in Zimbabwe and

popotamus can ruin a green within minutes, so we have installed electric fencing to keep them at bay. Other small game animals include kudu, impala, waterbuck, bushbuck, baboons (other than those paying green fees), jackals, the odd lion (which enjoys killing impala on or around the third tee) and the worst warthogs in the world. They in particular cause the most damage, grubbing up the tees and surrounds and then wallowing in them as soon as it rains or as soon as irrigation water is applied. Impala, pretty creatures that they are, also create damage as they gather on a green in the evening. The sight of these creatures, with the setting sun shining on their super red coats, is really lovely, but the urine from the ewe impala is five times more potent than sheep urine, so we get these strange yellow patches that kill the grass, followed by a vigorous revival that produces dark green areas that need mowing four times a day! In addition, we have crocodiles up to 1.5m in length in our pools.

Our only other real problem, although some people wouldn't think of it as such (and knowing your weather in Great Britain, it's a problem I wouldn't swap), is the extreme dry heat (Maximum 42°C, minimum 22°C, with relative humidity at 15-20%), which prevents bents and fescues from doing well. This means that we are obliged to follow the Bermudagrass route, which has its compensations because to keep *Poa annua* at bay we spray with propyzamide (Kerb) annually. It certainly makes fertilising much less of a problem, though in reality our basic principles don't change much and we find something of interest applicable to our circumstances in every issue of Greenkeeper International.

Should any members of BIGGA happen to visit nearby Victoria Falls, they will be made most welcome here – just contact the Elephant Hills Hotel and they will radio me. I would welcome the opportunity to talk 'shop' with a kindred spirit who knows what he is doing without declaring himself an 'expert'. Isolation is a problem which I guess is not easily appreciated by most greenkeepers, but I can tell you that when I see all the splendid training courses, seminars and opportunities for social intercourse available for you people over there, my mouth really waters.

repaired right here in our workshops.

It has taken a year to rectify the mistakes that were made, mistakes that in my opinion could have been avoided by a single reading of 'The Care of the Golf Course' from the STRI. As I observed to one member of the construction committee, 'election or appointment to a green committee does not immediately endow a person with encyclopaedic knowledge of golf course construction or operation, in fact, quite the reverse is true, as such people tend to lose what little knowledge they ever had'. This truism did not go down well.

Now the course is up and running we can concentrate on simple 'golf course' problems, which in a National Park means that we have a full range of wild animals with which to contend. A Buffalo or hip-