

Golfing heaven



on the Island of

**DAVID WHITE
gets a taste for
Indonesia and
meets a
greenkeeper
with a staff
of 100**

There can be few who have not at some time dreamed of casting off the shackles of routine to scuttle away to far-flung lands where the grass is perceived always as being greener. Bali, the 'Island of the Gods', is one such place where last year I had the privilege of spending several days with golfing journalists from around the globe competing for the coveted Publishers Cup. The nature of this trade orientated magazine precludes this feature from falling into a travelogue – though if any reader has a day or two to kill I willingly will bend their ear on why they should allow themselves to be pampered by Garuda Airlines whilst flying to Indonesia's foremost tourist destination, there to enjoy the fabulous beaches, the climate, the people, the food, the ambience, and, of course, the golf – all are out of this world! I must restrict myself to writing about the golf, essentially the way golf maintenance is practiced in this tropical dream location.

In Britain we are always banging on about the benefits of education, rightly so as so many plum jobs seem destined to fall into the hands of those who have broken the craft mould and moved into the technological age. It is significant therefore that I should find in Indonesia one man who had cut free from Uncle Sam's umbilical as a direct result of being college trained. His name is Mark Isley, he's just thirty and he is an American.

Mark has been the superintendent at the Bali Golf & Country Club, Nusa Dua, for just under three years, arriving in the now time-honoured tradition before the course was complete, indeed when the course was little more than roughed-out and long before contouring took place, the better to oversee installation of the irrigation and the sodding, seeding and subsequent nurturing of Bali's now delicious greens and fairways. Though far removed from being the typical British way, Bali G&CC's bunkers were sodded, as were those areas prone to erosion during the rainy season, whilst the rest of the playing surfaces were planted with 328 Bermuda grass 'sprigs' and roughs seeded with common Bermuda grass.

Quizzing Mark on how the 328 performed, he was honest enough to admit that, in hindsight, it would have perhaps been wiser to plant the fairways with a sturdier variety, say a 419 Bermuda, as 328 doesn't handle cart traffic well and tends to compact, also it reacts poorly in the drought conditions that often pre-

vail. To cap it all 328 is greedy and demands a lot of fertiliser – in a nutshell, it's a very high maintenance turf. "We used 328 to keep it simple", he told me, "after all, we brought the grass all the way from America and a single variety seemed to make sense at the time, now we live with what we've got!"

It was ever thus, the golf course manager having to live with the whims and foibles of the architect or designer and I found myself thinking, 'I've heard this before a thousand times.'

Mark's transformation from college kid to fully fledged golf course superintendent was something of a fairy tale in itself. He'd worked as an assistant in Florida for several years, he'd been an irrigation technician and worked also on commercial chemical spraying before making the purposeful decision to go back to school. At first he entered an ornamental horticulture programme and then made his big move – to Lake City College, famous in the States for turning greenhorns into expert greenkeepers – there to undergo four years training, interspersed with practical golf course work, whilst studying Turf Science.

Examinations concluded, Mark was considering several jobs in the offing when a fax arrived at the college, sent by Mike Martin, the constructor of Bali G&CC, calling for the services of a superintendent and seeking the college principal's advice. In Mark's own words, "right there and then I knew I was going to Bali."

Confidence breeds confidence and sure enough our foot-loose and fancy-free hero was hired, soon to be whisked away to the Paradise Isle – over 24 hours flying time from his native Florida, to a culture and life style that was completely alien to him.

Consider this: Mark has a maintenance staff of 100 full time employees, yes – 100! Twenty two work on landscapes, still more on common areas such as roads and areas that pass through the course, whilst twenty ladies pull weeds by hand, also sweeping paths and trimming edges. The rest are full time golf course personnel. Labour is not expensive, though Mark pointed out that at \$3.50 a day his course crew are well paid by Balinese standards, drawing a comparison with, say, a road builder who may only earn \$1.50 for digging limestone rock! The ladies make \$1.75 for their weeding, and in every case local opinion suggests that Bali G&CC are very good employers indeed, without destroying the local economy. Never believe, however, that everything is roses in paradise. Mark loves his staff, gets on well with them, but does not expect them to perform with quite the same enthusiasm as, say an American or European crew. For one thing, golf is a novel experience and they can't quite understand it, don't entirely

**Mark Isley,
superintendent:
'would you leave?'**





the Gods

share our enthusiasm. For another, the way of life is very laid-back and if they feel like taking it easy – the Balinese way – then they take it easy and no amount of whip cracking will produce a full head of steam. It's the natural way of life and Mark is not about to change it.

Living in Bali has made Mark quite a philosopher, causing him always to count his blessings. He has his own house, he's well insured, has a vehicle at his disposal and earns enough to save. "It makes me feel specially fortunate," he told me, "for there are many Indonesians who have nothing and yet remain blissfully happy – this is a happy island!"

Communication in the local tongue was a problem, but Mark has grasped the language nettle, attending classes in Bahas Indonesian, learning fast, gradually overcoming the difficulty. Naturally, he relies on his secretary and a few key Balinese staff who also speak English to relay many of his needs, especially to his crew of seven mechanics, who work shifts. They listen to the interpretation of any problems voiced by native operatives – 'it's got a funny knocking noise' – thus ensuring that machinery stays in pristine condition.

Maintenance is not without its share of headaches at Bali G&CC, for the course is constructed on miserably poor land, mostly sand over lime rock and as porous as any in the world. Though lush and inviting, the course demands constant aerification and this means a monthly routine of slitting and tining, though a major need, a Vertidrain, is still on Mark's wanted list. Added to this would be lightweight fairway mowers rather than the five-gang's he uses and he would certainly welcome a fully automatic programming system for his Rainbird irrigation. Currently this is controlled by 44 field clocks, each hand set and each liable to regular resetting, for Bali's electricity grid is known to flip-off at the least provocation – somehow it doesn't seem to matter and life just goes on...

Greens are loosely based on the USGA spec but minus the choker layer, which Mark would have preferred, for as he pointed out "the USGA is a proven system that works on this type of layout and I would have liked to have gone the whole nine yards!" Disease is not a major problem, despite a pH as high as 8.1, though there are occasional outbreaks of the heat stress induced *Curvularia lunata* on the greens. This responds well to treatment with Daconil, which he swears by. Other fertilisers are not easy to obtain due to monstrous shipping costs, and Mark is every bit the chemist in mixing his own magic brews. He would prefer to use slow-release but this is on the 'can't afford to ship' list and he therefore blends his own numbers of N P and K suitable to Bali's unique conditions. What Urea he obtains locally is of inferior quality and he cites occasions when such 'extras' as a shoe and a bag of old clothes were found within the exceedingly fine, dusty powder! Apart from solids he also concocts various liquid cocktails in storage tanks and these are applied in carefully metered quantities through the irrigation system.

Mark dresses his greens with pure sand, chuckling as he explained that the original organic mix used in construction was compiled using sawdust brought in from the local mills, this mixed with fertiliser and nitrogen, turned and watered multifold – a laborious three month process that somehow proved very effective.

Bali is indeed a sunshine paradise for the tourist, especially during the months of May through October, though to a golf course manager the dry, humid and often droughty conditions present a constant challenge which must be tackled with frequent watering. During construction three deep wells were bored and these fill the lakes, subsequently providing 500,000 gallons each day – the maximum that local water extraction permit will allow. Mark monitors his supply on a daily basis, taking samples of the moderately salty aqua – about 800/900 ppm during the summer season, lower during the rainy season, which in theory should start in November or December, though only two inches fell throughout last year.

This tourist did not find insects a problem, certainly none that nibbled. Nevertheless, Mark assured me that insects are a mega problem on the golf course, mostly 'no-see 'em' varieties that leave humans untouched whilst being a pig to control on turf, but he's getting there. In truth his whole job has been a continual learning process, seen at its best in his 'back to basics' improvisational approach, for as he explained "Bali is a real eye-opener in that nothing is typical – it is quite unique and I'm learning just by being here, the feeling is time-warp, a bit like turning the clock back some ten or twenty years. I've made mistakes and gained by learning from them, and I've never lost a green! In the USA I would have trained staff to back me, here I'm very much the hands-on teacher – encouraging, nurturing, bringing my staff forward. I've instituted an 'employee of the week' cash award, I teach my key people everything – I have to – and I'm actively bringing my head man forward to a point where, one day, he'll be a superintendent proper.

Frustrations? "Well, I'm ultra-light on herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers, though perhaps the biggest one is spare parts. I can wait as long as four months for a spare and as everything is shipped from America parts are hugely expensive. It's frustrating to have a machine down for the want of a minor part and on occasions I'll 'phone direct to the States and have something shipped UPS – this can turn a \$10 part into a \$100 part with shipping and duty so it's not likely to become a habit!"

I asked the inevitable question – will he stay? "Well, I've fallen in love with this fabulous place and I cannot envisage leaving. I've a beautiful girlfriend from the nearby island of Lombok, I love my job and I sleep like a baby every single night! Visiting golfers are generous in their praise for the golf course and I'm truly blessed with good fortune – I'll ask you the same question – would you leave?"

Not me, I never wanted to leave, but let me close on a personal note of misery and woe. The Publishers Cup is the brain-child of Parker Smith, a former senior editor with Golf magazine who now masterminds this and other media events world-wide under the Sports Opportunities International banner. Parker's fabulous promotions enable selected journalists to visit great golf locations in exotic places, to exchange views and ideas and, inevitably, to write about their experiences, whetting the appetites of those who will want to follow. People ask how I fared in the Publishers Cup and in a single word I answer – 'depressingly!' I arrived with a miserably sore back and immediately developed man's worst disease – the shanks. Three rounds of visiting the boondocks brought me nothing but grief. In this event the winner automatically returns to defend his title and in 1993 my friend Mike Takamori, publisher of Japan Golf Report, will play on the Grand Barrier Reef in Australia. Me? I'm wearing the booby prize – a Mickey Mouse watch that plays 'It's a Wonderful World'. That just about sums it up – Bali on all counts is the glittering star in a very wonderful world – whilst I finished as the damp squib!



A Balinese yardage marker



Hot work: ladies weeding at Bali Golf and Country Club