

# Art,

**Muirfield Village member, Clayton Hoskins, is a man steeped in golf and he takes a tongue in cheek look at the work of the greenkeeper. Photograph of Muirfield Village by Brian Morgan**

I would never do or say anything to offend a British greenkeeper. I also would not go out of my way to insult an International greenkeeper, but as far as I know I have never met any.

Until recently, I didn't know there were British greenkeepers, or as we more often call you nice people in the US, greenskeepers. For at least 30 years I have sojourned in England and Scotland on a regular basis, to attend big-time golf tournaments and to re-arrange some of your turf myself, now and again. It never dawned on me that a greenkeeper could make a living on a typical Scottish golf course. I have told all my American friends for years that the wind seeds the courses in Great Britain, and the sheep contour the bunkers and provide the fertiliser.

To learn that you exist, and that you have institutionalised yourselves into an Association, with a Head Office, and an Official Publication complete with an Editor who, until now, has been my friend – well, I find all of that shocking. And so American-like. That's the sort of thing WE do.

For decades American greenkeepers (also widely known as Course Superintendents at our courses where the guest fees are \$100 or higher) have banded together and bombarded us golfers with relentless propaganda about how vital they are to golf. Through their organised efforts, they engage in vast, ongoing projects like turf research, environmental experiments and watering techniques. They sometimes favour us with turgid lectures on how to sharpen a lawn mower.

For the most part, all of this has fallen upon our deaf ears. We do replace divots, sometimes; and we might send our caddie looking for the greenkeeper if we come across a sprinkler head which has gone berserk and is flooding a fairway; but aside from things like that, we tend to take conditions as we find them and give very little thought



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to any kind of keepers except scorekeepers.

The attitude of the typical US golfer is grass is grass. Dirt is dirt. Water is that stuff which has either red or yellow stakes around it. Environmentalists are people who do not play golf.

Everything I know about plants I learned as a schoolboy in the one and only botany course I ever had nerve enough to take. Surely I don't have to tell you experts that no matter what you call it, blue grass or bent, essentially all grass is identical. Like Gaul, it is divided into three parts: It has a root, a leaf and a section in between at the spot where the sky meets the soil, called a crown. Now that's about it. The rest is just saying the same thing over and over again.

How on earth can you keep grass FROM growing? My old aunt Minnie knows that if she scatters a little grass seed around in the bare spots and adds a little water now and then, she is going to get grass. If she adds a little fertiliser it will turn green and grow. And then Uncle George has to mow it. He knows that.

You can give these little plants Latin names if you want to, and you can mow back and forth until the fairways look like checker boards; but the fact remains that you guys are selling snake oil.

The above assessment is not universally true. I want to tell you about an exception to the rule, an American Course Superintendent (because it costs \$125 to play HIS course) by the name of Michael McBride, who for many years has been my personal friend. He is the best greenkeeper I ever met.

Mike is the head man at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio. You will recognise instantly that this is the US soil upon which, in 1987, the visiting team first won Mr Samuel Ryder's pretty little gold jug. We now share that honour with Oak Hill, in Rochester, New York, another of our very finest courses. Nevertheless, we at Muirfield Village were the first.

You haven't seen a well-kept golf course until you see Muirfield Village. Some of our grass may be "Bent", but it all stands upright, proudly and stately. Our bluegrass is not blue; it is green enough to make an Irishman homesick.

Botanically speaking, Muirfield Village never has up days or down days. Each day is more sensational than the last. It has to be that way, because if the place were to be visited by Jack Nicklaus, the founder, designer, builder and chief-taskmaster, on a day when it looked a little ragged, believe me heads would drop and roll like pine cones, and careers would come to a sad end. We are talking perfection here. Mr Nicklaus takes the golfing term "course management" seriously whether he is playing or surveying the scenery.

## About Clayton C Hoskins

Born and lives in Ohio, Great-grandparents came to the US from Scotland and Derbyshire in the 1840s. Served in World War II as a carrier-based Navy pilot. Practiced law in Columbus, Ohio for nearly 40 years. Represented Jack Nicklaus and served as attorney and PGA Tour player-manager for several other prominent golfers.

Served as Honorary Co-chairman of the 1987 Ryder Cup matches conducted at his home club, Muirfield Village Golf Club. Loses money regularly with a 9.4 Handicap Index.

In 1974 attended classes at the University of St. Andrews.

When you look out across our fairways all you see is sparkle. If a bare spot should develop, due to bad seed or perhaps a "hole made by a greenkeeper..." (see 1996 Rules of Golf, R-25. You thought only burrowing animals made holes, didn't you?), then one of Mike McBride's 25 or more full-time assistants will speed to the spot and re-sod an acre or so around the blemish so it won't spread like a tumour.

The fact that Muirfield Village always is dressed in her finest, is attested to by the touring professionals, who year after year claim that it is the best conditioned course they play. Even a golf writer, and surely a golf writer can not be a ninny, wrote in his recent book that our greens are "fast, true and carefully maintained." This may be the only time in history that a golf writer ever saw anything at a golf course

which he liked. I probably could cite you kings who have said the same thing; but somehow or other quoting a golf writer gives me more satisfaction.

Now, get ready. Here comes the stinger. No doubt you are thinking to yourself that Mike McBride is a distinguished horticulturist or agronomist, or a famed botanist, or a renowned plant pathologist or maybe even God, himself. Surely he must be a farmer of some kind. He probably has more degrees than a thermometer in the middle of August. He probably eats grass for breakfast, and sleeps on a sack of weed killer. He probably named his oldest son John Deere.

No way. Michael McBride, the top dog at the best conditioned golf course in the US has just one college degree and it is a degree in (eat your heart out)... political science. He doesn't know any more about agriculture than Picasso knew about anatomy.

So there. I rest my case. Green-keeping is an art, not a science. You don't have to know anything about when to spread lime or how to scatter around those little plugs all over the place, in order to be a greenkeeper. You have to be a politician. You have to be a hail fellow well met, who can win the confidence of the owner, and at the same time keep from being killed by the members.

Mike McBride and the hundreds of other truly successful greenkeepers of the world learned years ago that there is no need to worry about such things as whether the soil is acidic. It may be, at least in spots where someone might have spilled a little bottle of hydrochloric acid or something; but so what? Clean it up, and forget it.

The important thing for a greenkeeper to keep in mind, if he ever expects to become a Course Superintendent is that if you can't win the votes of the golfers who play your course it doesn't matter whether you set aside enough wetlands or maintain enough rough to keep the rabbits happy.

Environmentalists do not rule the world. Politicians do. Spiking the greens the morning of a tournament may make sense if you listen to a soil expert; but a politi-

cian would never do it. Riding around all day on a tractor and looking for trouble is a waste of time. You should spend your time in the grille room, buttering up the members. After all, if they are down on you, it doesn't matter how well your grass is growing.

While I certainly have been fair to all of you, it occurs to me that I am being a little unfair to my friend, Mike McBride. He may read this, if enough of you send copies to him. I should not leave the impression that Mike doesn't do anything but glad-hand all day long.

He is the hardest working Course Superintendent I ever met. He has surrounded himself with well-informed experts in all phases of golf course maintenance. He has attended every seminar ever conducted by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, especially those convening in Hawaii and Las Vegas. He is a family man, a gentleman, a scholar and a pillar in our community.

If you send this article to Mike, be sure to include that last paragraph. It may be the only paragraph he will read. It will be the only one he will remember.

Now that I know there is such an organisation as British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association, my next visit to your country will have new meaning for me. I shall look out across your dazzling fairways and say to myself, "Wow, look what Mother Nature has accomplished with the help of my friends at Aldwark Manor."

## THE BIGGEST MISTAKE I'VE EVER MADE AND WOULD ADMIT TO IS:



"Forgetting to reprogramme the irrigation system after testing it and having it come on at 11.30am and follow the golfers around the course."

Richard Whyman, Bude GC