

Top seeds!

Barenbrug UK has recently joined BIGGA's Golden Key Sponsorship programme and, as Scott MacCallum found out, it comes on top of a major expansion within the company.

It's amazing what you end up thinking about in the bath. Last week, as I was having my regular soak, I found myself wondering why the strongest competitors in sporting events are called seeds. It was probably because of Wimbledon.

For the life of me I couldn't come up with an answer and I found myself searching for an answer from the type of seeds we all know about. Sowing seeds of success... It didn't quite follow.

As my mind wandered and the water became cooler and the bubbles less bubbly, mentally I put the two types of seeds together and wondered what would happen if you ranked seed companies. Would you have the Top Seed seed?

If that were the case there is a fair chance that the Seeding Committee would consider Barenbrug for that honour based on the criteria that Barenbrug is a global company with a group of companies spread throughout the world and also that Barenbrug varieties are a constant feature at, or near, the top of many of the STRI Rankings. The company has also just joined BIGGA's Golden Key sponsorship programme.

The man whose name adorns the familiar yellow bags is Joseph Barenbrug, a Dutch seed



merchant who established the company in 1904, and since then, while always operating with a Barenbrug at the helm, the company has set a pattern that many of its varieties have followed – showing great strength and an ability to reproduce across the full gamut of climates.

"We export to 80 countries worldwide and have companies all over Europe as well as Australia, New Zealand, North America and China," explained Michel Mulder, the Dutch Managing Director of Barenbrug UK, and a man whose enthusiasm for the industry is infectious.

The British arm of the Barenbrug empire was established in 1990 but the name had been known in Britain for many years as a wholesale product before that, principally in the agricultural field, but Michel is quick to point out that Barenbrug products were supplied to St Andrews as far back as 25 years ago.

In 1990 Michel and John Bradley, who is now Amenity Sales Manager, were appointed

and it was only then that they started to market the Barenbrug products as a brand.

"What happened when John and I went out into the UK market was that most of our customers, like turf producers or golf courses said 'where have you been. We've seen all your varieties for years at the top of the lists and we've been waiting for you'. It was a very positive and a great way to start the company," explained Michel.

"With this support from the industry we really took off," he added, recalling that the first show in the golf market that they exhibited at was BTME '92.

It is indeed remarkable that Barenbrug UK has grown so quickly in an industry where it takes 15 years to develop a new variety to the stage where it can be commercial viable.

"Because of the nature of grass – it flowers only once a year and as it is a cross pollination plant – it takes a long time to produce enough seed for it to be sold," explained John.

"In the trial system you always take what you consider to be the best and test the potential new variety against it and our philosophy is that we only want to introduce grasses which are better than the existing. There is no point in proceeding if we are going to produce a new perennial rye grass which is no better than Barclay or Barcredo," he explained, while adding that he is excited by the performances of some of the varieties nearing the end of the 15 year process.

Much of the success of Barenbrug comes from harnessing the excellent work Mother Nature has already done in producing grass species to produce the latest varieties.

"As a company we like to work with nature. Over 300 grass seed species have been developed naturally without our help and those which do not have winter hardiness or disease resistance for example have already been weeded out. Using breeding technology we can go in, collect and refine the species and try to develop them to increase their yield," explained John.

Having research stations and plant breeding stations in Northern Ireland, Holland, France – one in the north and one in the south, North American, New Zealand and Australia gives Barenbrug a complete range of climates in which to work from.

"There is a lot of inter linking between the research stations and we can combine the drought tolerance on the southern hemisphere with the winter hardiness of the northern hemisphere. All extremes can be tested and, by sharing the information, we get the best of both worlds," explained Michel.

"We really are a global company and say that we can supply from the North Pole down to the South Pole!" he added.



Constant re-appraisal among the testing at Barenbrug



It is perhaps surprising that a company which is found all over the world has a worldwide workforce which numbers a mere 380.

"This is a business where you need warehouses, research stations and a sales force. We have about 60 people on the research side. To produce the seed we contract farmers to use their fields and have fieldmen who monitor quality and advise the farmers on chemical usage. The farmer is happy because the better quality the crop the higher his price," said Michel.

As more of the top rated varieties are produced the more the price to the end user will come down.

"In five to ten years time our varieties will be affordable to clubs in each budget category and everyone should benefit from the quality up-grade," explained Michel, who added that Barenbrug produces a combined 60,000 tonnes of seed a year worldwide in both agriculture and amenity sectors – that's three and a half million golf greens!

Grass breeding is an industry where the ability to see into the future is extremely important and there are a number of areas where Barenbrug is conducting research.

"Our biggest challenge is to producing varieties which are going to cope if, under legislation designed to protect the environment, the

use of fertilisers is restricted. We are also spending a great deal of time looking at disease and how it will affect grasses in drought conditions.

"When I visited our breeding stations recently I didn't only see all the new varieties being tested but them all being tested against all the known diseases," revealed Michel.

While there is much being done worldwide the UK arm of Barenbrug is also making major strides.

"In '92 we had a turn over of £1 million and a staff of ten people. We finished last year with a turnover of around £5 million and a staff of 24 and our aim for the year 2000 is to have a turnover of £7.5 million and a staff of around 30," said Michel.

One of the key members of staff doesn't appear in those statistics however. Mungo the cat is a permanent resident in the warehouse and does sterling work in ensuring it remains vermin free.

"Mungo is extremely popular and colleagues even come in at Christmas and New Year to feed him," said Michel.

As is inevitable such growth means that accommodation which, at the beginning, was more than spacious enough soon becomes cramped and Barenbrug UK is in the process of addressing that particular problem.

"July 1 sees the start of work on our new offices on our Bury St Edmunds site. Greenkeepers and groundsmen visit us when we talk about breeding programmes and producing cultivars but at the moment we cannot accommodate the groups of up to 30 that we would like."

"It's been needed for a while but the last thing a seedsman does is put money in an office," joked Michel, of the half a million pound investment, which will see a two phased development including additional warehouse space, office accommodation and a custom build presentation room.

Barenbrug's Golden Key sponsorship has come about through the company's desire to be closer to the end user and will compliment the existing programme which has involved taking groups of greenkeepers to the research station in Holland and working closely with individual greenkeepers in the UK.

"There are not many weeks when Michel and I do not visit a golf course and they are occasions when we are always learning from them. It is important to speak with greenkeepers and listen to their views," said John.

One of those with whom Michel has a close relationship is John Philp at Carnoustie.

"With Carnoustie hosting The Open in 1999 we feel that we are preparing for The Open together," said Michel.

Michel and John both stressed, however, that Barenbrug has the philosophy, that the golf course just around the corner is just as important as the big name venue and that is always key to the thinking.