



A Tour de Force



The PGA European Tour recently became a Golden Key supporter and Scott MacCallum visited their Headquarters to find out more about the importance they place on sound greenkeeping.

The European Tour is one of sport's great success stories of the last 25 years. Over that period it has grown from a division of the Professional Golfer's Association to the extent that the overall standard of golf played can rival the US Tour, which was historically the benchmark for any golf Tour.

The truest measure of that is the Ryder Cup which was an enjoyable picnic for the American superstars until the early 80s, since when Europe has held the famous Trophy from 1985 to 1991 and again from '95 to the present day.

The beauty of the European Tour is its diversity and any player who succeeds must show an ability to adapt his game to any number of different conditions, while at the same time coping personally with the different cultures, languages and food with which life on Tour brings him into contact.

To highlight the point let's count the countries the 1997 European Tour visits. 1. Australia 2. South Africa 3. Dubai 4. Morocco 5. Portugal 6. Spain 7. Italy 8. England 9. Germany 10. France 11. Ireland 12. Scotland 13.



Helping hand: John Paramor, right, with Bernhard Langer and his family
CHARLES BRISCOE-KNIGHT

Holland 14. Sweden 15. Czech Republic 16. Switzerland. Of course if you take into account Approved Special Events you can add the United States to that list.

While there are so many variables one thing the Tour likes to keep consistent is the condition of the course. The responsibility for that falls to the Director of Tour Operations, John Paramor, who works closely with the Director of Greenkeeping, Richard Stillwell.

It could be said that Richard is a little like Peter Mandelson. While the acknowledged architect of Labour's election win is now the Minister without Portfolio Richard is the greenkeeper without a course. Like Mr Mandelson, though, Richard's influence is all pervading and he ensures that when the professionals arrive on the week of the tournament the conditions are as near ideal as is possible in the circumstances.

It was in a brand new suite of offices at the Tour's Headquarters at The Wentworth Club that John and Richard described what the Tour looks for in a venue.

"What we are trying to produce is firm greens whereby if a professional misses a fairway he's going to have the devil's own job to stop the ball on the green but if he hits it on the fairway he's going to be able to provide enough backspin to stop it on the green," explained John, speaking just a week away from one of his main duties of the year – Tournament Director of the Volvo PGA Championship.

Wentworth is anything but a typical venue for the Tour. It's right on their doorstep and in Chris Kennedy they know they are dealing with a Course Manager who knows exactly what is expected for the flagship event of the Tour's season.

A more typical venue for the Tour would

involve Richard, the Tournament Director and usually the Tournament Promoter visiting the course just as soon as it has been chosen as a venue.

"We would check the whole course with the Head Greenkeeper, Course Manager or Superintendent depending where in the world we were," explained Richard.

"We cover every aspect from tee to green as well as the practice ground. One of the most important things is to get the tees level and weed free. However, we can't just demand what we want done because it may be that the greenkeeper already has a policy of his own.

"All these things have to be taken into consideration but you generally find the more talented the greenkeeper the more likely he is to welcome you with open arms. The less talented see you as a threat."

The usual requirements for a tournament are level tees, firm fast putting surfaces and a specific depth of sand in the bunkers.

"We ask for an inch of sand or, abroad, we normally ask for half a golf ball. It's a nice, easily understood yardstick.

"We then put in a programme of what we recommend should be done with the single biggest problem usually being the eradication of thatch. If the club agrees we would go back nearer the time to make sure it was done," said Richard.

Depending upon the expertise on tap at the club the Tour might put in one of their own greenkeepers to work on the course in the run up to the tournament. They are Roger Stillwell, Richard's son, Mark Lewis and Martin O'Rourke. At the Moroccan Open in March a Tour greenkeeper was on site seven days a week for five weeks and was joined for the final fortnight by another.

The Tour also receives great support from Ransomes and Levingtons. Ransomes indeed supplied a container load of machinery for the Moroccan Open and greenkeepers have a direct line to Ipswich for any assistance they require while Levington have been particularly important with regard to soil analysis and preparing papers on



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European legislation for each country the Tour visits.

"Each golf course is an individual and you treat the greenkeeper in a different way. If I go to The Oxfordshire I ask him how he's doing and we go for a coffee before having a walk round the course. At other courses you have to cajole them, bully them, but the main thing is to become their friend and be close to them. We are there to help."

Richard is in his 11th year working on the Tour, having previously been Course Manager at Royal Porthcawl, and he can still remember his first brief.

"It was that we must never take credit and we are never there at the prize giving and never there to say 'we did it'. Once the greenkeeper has learned that you are not going to pinch his kudos, or his job, he welcomes you the second year.

Our communication level is very high. We get endless phone calls from foreign greenkeepers asking our advice and we pick up loads of information helpful to other greenkeepers. Guys get very worried when an event is coming to their course," said Richard.

"I believe that BIGGA should be all over Europe and feel that is where the Tour can help the Association. If we want information we know we can contact BIGGA and ask for it," said Richard.

Some of that worry might be generated from the reputation the Tour acquired for killing golf courses – demanding perfection for the one week of the year and to hell with the other 51.

"Some years ago a greenkeeper might prepare his course by cutting everything down, stopping watering, all sorts of strange things, just to get it right. Then the course would die and he'd blame the tournament. That's how reputations like that get around.



"The truth is now we make it very clear that we are removing the thatch. We never turn off the water – we may use judicious amounts of water but we do not turn it off and we rarely cut below 3.5 mil."

John reinforces that view by saying the Tour is very much of the opinion that they don't want a greenkeeper to kill his course.

"Our main priority is to provide a fair golfing test. We want the greens smooth and if that means 9.5 on the stimpmeter instead of 10 we'd say to the players 'That's it guys. That's the best we could get' We will get the maximum speed provided it doesn't affect the smoothness of the putting surface," explained John.

What is achieved is often a revelation to the Course Manager himself.

"I'd say that at 60% of events, at some stage during the week, they come along and say this is fantastic how can we keep it like this," said Richard. "They could, the greens would have to come up a bit but from tee to green it could be. 'Most people could do what we do if they used the correct technique and managed their man power to the best of their ability.'"

From his position John is well placed to comment on greenkeeping and greenkeepers.

"I get very frustrated when I see the Chairman of Green at private member clubs, without any formal training in soil, grass or irrigation, trying to tell someone who has spent his life learning the job what to do. Somewhere along the line that is not right," said John. "I like to think that where we go we try to raise the profile of that greenkeeper," he added.

While the quality of greenkeeping has improved over the last few years so has the interest level and knowledge of the players.

"The average member plays something like 25 tournaments on Tour but taking in the other courses he plays and other events in the rest of the world he plays a great many courses.

"He wants to learn why he putts better on certain greens. Is it the speed, the smoothness, the climatic conditions or the grass plant?" said John.

Richard added, "I worked for a year on the Tour and no-one knew who I was. Now the players just love sitting down and talking with me in the evenings. A lot of players are getting involved in the business and I know Rodger Davis, for example, has his own turf nursery."

The downside is that detrimental comments occasionally appear from disgruntled players in the press.

"I do feel that the players are put on pedestals nowadays. Some generally believe that it must be the golf course's fault if they miss a putt and unfortunately they say it to the press and get headlines for it," commented John.

What advice would the Tour give to a BIGGA member who learns that his course is to host a European Tour event next year?

"I'd say to the greenkeeper enjoy it and I know that he will enjoy it. He'll meet a whole lot of new people and everyone is extremely friendly," said Richard, who added that it was normal practice to invite a greenkeeper to another event before his own so he can learn how things operated.

"He'll also come out of the event with an awful lot more than he went in whether that be more machinery or a better watering system. Personally they also benefit. There is a Spanish greenkeeper who has written a book on how to prepare a course for a tournament and now works for the King in his botanical garden as a sideline," revealed Richard.

The Tour also holds a Greenkeeping Conference in Penina, Portugal every other year.

"It is a way of getting all our tournament greenkeepers and some club officials together and getting them to communicate in a social atmosphere.

"There is a universal language of greenkeeping and this is tremendous because as well as the formal lectures much of the information is exchanged in the bar afterwards," said Richard.

"It is the brotherhood thing as they are all in the same boat – in charge of tournament venues," he added.

CD REVIEW

Into the computer age

The management of turfgrass diseases has entered the computer age with the arrival, on the market, of a Compact Disk ROM which can help you to identify diseases, determine causes, discover cures and introduce management techniques to prevent further attacks. Details of the package are:

CD ROM

Turfgrass Diseases, Diagnosis and Management

by Gail L Shumann and James D McDonald

Published by the American Phytopathological Society

Cost \$310 (single user), \$410 local network

Hardware Required (PC)

486 processor or higher

8Mb RAM minimum

VGA colour monitor

Double speed CD ROM Drive

Mouse

with Windows 3.1 or Windows 95

Hardware Required (Mac)

68030/25 Mhz processor or faster

8Mb RAM minimum

VGA colour monitor

Double speed CD ROM Drive

Mouse

with system 7.0.1 or higher

The hardest part of using this programme is the meaning of *Phytopathological** but once I had looked that up in the dictionary, the rest was simple. The CD looks like any other and has a title sheet which gives instructions on how to install it. I used a Macintosh Powerbook running system 7.5.0 but PC operation is also straightforward. Once the disk was in, I double clicked on Main menu and I was presented with the Introductory page. This page gives access to all parts of the package, simply by clicking buttons and lets you select a number of options. Clicking on the Non Infectious diseases button gives you access to two other buttons, Biotic Agents ie Algae, Black Layer, Insects and Moss and Non Biotic Agents. Clicking on Non Biotic Agents gives access to three more buttons, Chemical, Mechanical and Physical. Clicking on the chemical button lets you select more options ie Pesticides, Animal urine/salts, Fertilisers etc. Each selection gives you access to the identification, control and prevention of each type of agent. The final button in the Main Menu list is Other Diseases and Disorders. This button gives access to Endophytic Fungi, Mycorrhizae, Primitive Organisms, Bacterial Diseases, Nematodes and Viral Diseases. Further buttons give access to identification aids, disease development information and references for each disease/disorder.

The second part of the main menu is titled Short Cuts. This section is sub-divided into: Diagnostic Guide to diseases, Diseases of Specific Grasses, including Annual Bluegrass, Bentgrass, Fine Fescue, Ryegrass etc and a Turf Grass Identification Guide. For each grass selected, either from the Specific Grasses Menu or through the Turfgrass Identification Menu, you can view a calendar, which shows when various diseases may be present, you can then take a closer look at the various diseases, see how the diseases develop and look at suggested management techniques.

Despite some American spellings and a few American terms eg Annual Bluegrass (Meadowgrass), this is a very useful guide for anyone wanting to learn about diseases or needs to identify a particular disease. It contains some very clear pictures (most of which may be enlarged) and allows fast and easy access to a wide range of information. The disk would be a very useful asset for colleges and for any golf course manager with access to a computer which has a CD ROM drive.

* *Phytopathology* – the study of plant diseases

■ The CD is available from APS Press Europe Branch Office, Broekstraat 47, B-3001, Heverlee, Belgium Tel: 32 16204035 Fax: 32 16202535. E-mail apspress@pophost.eunet.be

■ Ken Richardson at BIGGA HQ, Tel: 01347 838581, can be contacted for further information on the CD.

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