

A lab with letters after its name

European Turfgrass Laboratories in Stirling is the only lab outside America to hold an A2LA certificate.

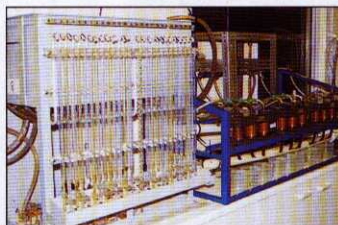
European Turfgrass Laboratories has become the first lab outside of the United States, and one of only five in total, to receive accreditation from the USGA.

The Stirling-based lab was formed in 1996 out of a partnership between three agronomy consultancies, Grass Technology International, Professional Sportsturf Design and McMillan-Shiels and it is run by a full time staff of three.

The six directors of ETL, who are among the best known names in their respected fields, are John Souter, Eddie Connaughton, John Hacker and Mike Harbridge – who also acts as Lab Manager, Jack McMillan and George Shiels.

Prior to the setting up of the lab, each of the three companies was using a separate facility.

“We used the labs at Myer-scough College, George had his own lab as did GTI and we



thought that we would benefit from pooling our resources,” explained John Hacker, as we spoke in the lab based to the rear of Souter of Stirling’s premises.

“Although we are in competition as consultants, we’ve all been in the business a long time and hold each other in high esteem,”

“There is something to be gained by us all in having this independent facility. We are confident that it works effectively,” he added.

Lab Supervisor is Ann Murray who works with technicians, Audrey Mackintosh and Sharon Bruce. The equipment she already had from the GTI lab was pooled with that from George Shiel’s own lab in Woking.

“We now have two of every-

thing which enables us to do a whole lot more and we extended the premises quite a bit into a larger Portakabin than we had previously occupied,” explained Ann.

When the lab was started ETL contracted Neil Howard, whose initial PHD work established the USGA spec back in the ‘60s, and he came over from the States and worked with them for about ten days. He has since been retained by the lab as a consultant.

“We decided to do this before we even went for the accreditation because he would be able to give us a good idea of how close we were to the standard required and how much work we may have had to do,” explained Ann.

“What he did discover when he looked at our testing was that we were not that far out and that we were within the margin of error.”

The process involved in achieving the A2LA accreditation recognised by the USGA is long and arduous and not a little expensive.

“We had to put together a qual-

ity manual which contains everything about the company – where it came from, how it runs and details on all our testing procedures,” explained John.

Once the application had been made, a date was given for an assessor from the States to visit the lab and this visit was made last March.

“He looked into everything in great detail going through every file to check how the business ran and what we did. It was a full audit.

“We had to perform certain tests for him and he even went so far as to ask how we knew the weight we dropped for the compaction test was three pounds. I told him that we had specified three pounds to the engineering company who had made it for us but he insisted we take it to bits and weigh it. Fortunately it was three pounds,” said Ann.

“We were happy with what we were doing but there is nothing like an external person to look at you to sharpen you up. Also, there were certain things we were

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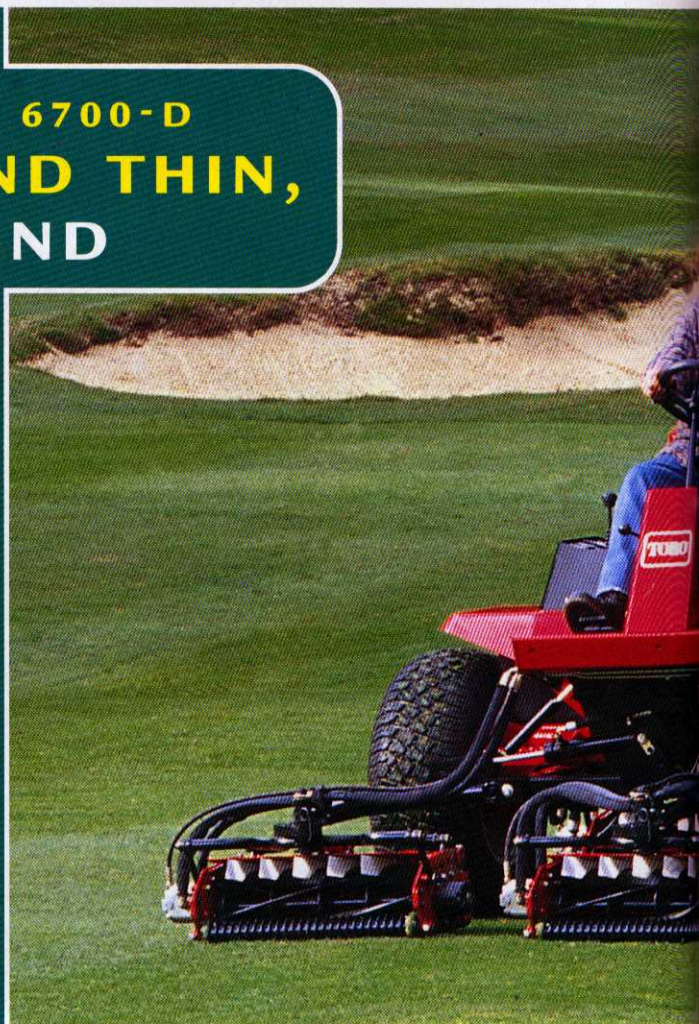
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**Ann Murray, centre,
with Sharon Bruce, left
and Audrey Macintosh**

doing to the British standard which weren't the same as the USGA so we had to change to the USGA so it would not be listed as a deviation."

The examination was certainly more thorough than Ann and her team had expected.

"I didn't think it would be a cake walk but what we said at the end of the week was that they'll be coming back in two years to

re-assess and we'll be ready for them then," said Ann.

Perhaps the main difference between an accredited lab and one which isn't is not the quality of the results but in the recording of each stage in the process.

"It is very important that there is a paper chase from the product coming in the door to the paper going out of the door and that it goes all the way through,"

explained John.

"Other labs might be very similar but might not be able to back track a result the same way as we can."

The day the confirmation of ETL's accreditation popped through the letter box was a great one indeed and grouped the lab – alongside Brookside laboratories Inc, in Ohio; N.W. Hummel and Co, in New York; Thomas Turf

Services Inc in Texas and Turf Diagnostic and Design in Kansas – as the only five accredited USGA labs in the world.

The benefits to the three shareholding companies are great.

"First of all Ann and her colleagues are keyed into what we want. When we ring up they know exactly what we are after. Also a few years ago if we had sent something to a lab it might have been a five or six week turn-around. Here we can get them back within the week," said John.

About 75% of the lab's work comes from the three shareholding companies with the rest coming from other clients.

They also take part in comparative testing for universities in the United States including the Western State testing programme and work for Pennsylvania State.

"We see the results and can tell where our results fell within the band. You always want to be in the middle," laughed Ann.

It is one of the few occasions the lab, which strives for excellence, would ever settle for mediocrity!

