

British greenkeeper Paul Davies shares his  
experience of working in Colorado, USA

# Tiara.

Crowning glory.



“So, Paul, do you work out at Tiara Rado golf course?” asked Bill, an acquaintance whom I had recently met.

“Yes I do, Bill, why do you ask?” I enquired.

“Well, my three foot long Iguana lizard has escaped and was seen down on the 2nd fairway. If you see him, he answers to the name of ‘Buddy.’ Okay?”

“Yeah, and I came into town on a stagecoach last night with Butch Cassidy!” I thought to myself.

In fact, my arrival was well over a year ago, on August 16, 1997, aboard a 747 out of Gatwick Airport, on a wet and windy 15 degree Celsius summer day. Sixteen hours and seven time zones later I was greeted by my fiancée, Kelly, at Denver International Airport, at the base of the Rocky Mountains.

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I had twice previously been to Colorado and crossed the Rockies but the drive west to Grand Junction still did not fail to impress me. Driving among the stunning snow capped peaks at an elevation of 12,000 feet through alpine valleys and past some strangely named places such as, 'Arapaho, Genesee, Sunlight, Arrowhead and Buffalo Bill's grave' was something so far removed from where I had just left. Stamford, in Lincolnshire, doesn't have many mountains or ski slopes. However, as I have come to discover, it does have much better pubs and beer!

August 18th came around much too quickly - my first day at work and back to reality. I had been to America four months earlier and met with Doug Jones, Superintendent of the two golf courses owned by the City of Grand Junction, Lincoln Park and Tiara Rado. Doug had put to rest one of my main concerns about moving to the US, namely, the question of what I was going to do for work. At an informal lunch meeting, he told me that there was a job for me when I was ready to move over.

Great! Although only a seasonal position, it gave me more confidence to go back to England and tackle the nightmarish immigration process with the US Embassy in London. Coincidentally, when I returned to England after that trip, the sun was shining at Gatwick with a forecast high of a pleasant 27 degrees Celsius and no rain!

Day one at Tiara Rado, located in the high desert on the western slope of the Rockies, was pretty interest-

ing. This was the run-up week to the Rocky Mountain Open, Colorado's oldest professional golf tournament. Holy smoke! This was the big time for a greenkeeper who had just come from a 9 hole course with a budget that was stretched to do something special for Captain's day! Also, being overdressed for the 41 degree Celsius heat, feeling the effect of working at an altitude of 4,700 feet, and suffering from jet-lag made me start to wonder if I had done the right thing. Paul Greene, of Brooksby College, had definitely not prepared me for this during my greenkeeping training.

Day two was easier. The guys were opening up a bit more and taking an interest in this new crew member. Comments such as, "Hey, come listen to this guy talk!" and "Is it true it rains every day in Britain?" were common. "Well, we have about 85 inches a year," I replied. "85 inches, huh? Well how come, when we see the British Open on television, the grass is dead?" There then followed a lengthy explanation that the 'British Open' is simply 'The Open' and quite a few words about the tradition of links courses and the merits of bent grasses and drought resistance, etc.

So, point explained and it's time to leave the maintenance shop. It's pouring with rain, and I mean bouncing off the fairways I express my surprise to a native Coloradan with an expletive remark describing the intensity of this deluge. Without even looking outside, he says with a hint of ridicule, "It never rains in the desert." Actually, it does, and we

have an enormous eight inches per year, which is the reason that every square inch of turf needs to be irrigated during the hot months of summer, in order to survive.

I was stunned when told that, if the wind picks up at all when the temperatures are high, the course requires 900,000 gallons of irrigation per day. The aridity and lack of humidity is actually a welcome factor when working outdoors here, high humidity would be very difficult to handle with the heat. The afternoon summer showers that we occasionally receive have very little or no effect on the humidity levels.

The heat and aridity make it necessary to carry a chapstick (wait for this!) to moisturise the inside of your nose to avoid cracking and bleeding. Sunscreen is provided by the employer, with the standard protection factor of 46 being the most popular. Also, UV protective sunglasses are recommended and available as PPE. A gallon of water will just about see you through the working day, even if you don't feel thirsty. Luckily, we are off the course by 1pm in the summer months. The nights feel cool, but even at 4.45 am, when I'm leaving the freeway and heading to the course, the temperature is around the 25 degree Celsius mark.

The winters here are quite adverse, too. With irrigation systems shut down and very little precipitation, the grasses go into a state of dormancy and gradually turn a patchy light green; some areas go totally brown. This is a different picture from what you see of the American courses on television in Europe.



However, the transition in spring-time is very interesting when witnessed for the first time, as I did this season.

During July it was hard to believe that in March, when I returned to work from winter break, the course was covered with 3 inches of snow and the temperatures had been running at around freezing point for about two months. Some of the higher mountain courses, which are only a few hours from Tiara Rado, have only 30 frost free days per year. On a recent visit to one of the most exclusive clubs in America, the Country Club of the Rockies, Superintendent Kevin Ross told me that he had a few years where he had seen snow during each and every month of the year! Kevin, by the way, is the first American employed in greenkeeping, who I have met, that is a member of BIGGA.

Some of the mountain courses change over to winter activities when the snows arrive. Snow falls commonly accumulate to a depth of four to eight feet and stay for five months. Courses such as Telluride and Vail turn over to cross country skiing, with groomed trails. I can only imagine what is going through the Superintendent's head when the melt starts and the disease damage to the turf is revealed.

To quote one Superintendent, whom I asked as to his course of preventative action against snow mould, "During September and October you spray, spray and spray until your brain drops out." I think I understand.

The coming of winter brings a few unique problems to the high courses. As the snow line gets lower, so do the elk and deer, which can be a serious threat to greens and other surfaces, when

you consider a herd of elk can number around a 100 and a full grown bull elk can weigh a 1000 pounds.

At Tiara Rado, we have the occasional visit by a pair of deer, the odd coyote, skunks and racoons who love to dig in the fairways and, in the summer time, bull snakes, which look alarmingly similar to rattle snakes, without the rattle. I, personally, don't want to hang about to check if it rattles at the safe end!

Each morning starts with five of the 20 man crew (Yes, 20 greens staff for 18 holes!), going straight out to walk mow greens with Toro GM1000s set at a super low height of 3mm. We have no need to dew whip, owing to the dryness, dew point temperatures and little threat from disease. Walk mowing really is a great way to start the day here, watching the sunrise over the world's largest table top mountain, the Grand Mesa, at the far end of the valley. The course is located directly below the towering 1000 feet red sandstone cliffs of the Colorado National Monument, which glow a deep reddish brown in the first light of day, like some sort of geological backcloth. Colorado, incidently, means "colour red" in Spanish.

To talk further about the amount of greens staff employed, most courses in Colorado have a few year round employees. The rest of the crew is made up of seasonal staff who work for about eight months and summer help who work during their summer break. The crews are usually headed by a Superintendent possessing a four year turf science degree, with the rest of the crew, apart from the mechanic and irrigation technicians, being totally unqualified. This is an area where, I believe, Britain is far more advanced than the US. The crews here learn almost entirely from the Superintendents, be that teaching good, or not so good. Greenkeepers here are surprised at the multi-level education available in Britain for greenkeepers and one has even shown an interest in the same HNC distance learning course



(very distant!) that I am currently undertaking through the highly recognised Elmwood College, in Cupar, Scotland.

The types of grass we are managing here are those found in the cool season zones of the USA. These are, typically, very similar to those found on courses in Britain. Our main species are perennial rye, smooth stalked meadow, some creeping bent, plenty of poa annua and, in our region, the unwelcome and highly invasive Bermuda grass.

Next season will see a major overseeding programme of the greens using a new variety of *Agrostis palustris* - Penn A4. Converting Poa greens to a monostand of *Agrostis* will be a major success story, when taking into account the seven days a week mowing programme, height of cut, enormous watering requirements, stressful weather conditions and high player traffic - good luck boss!

The cultural practices here are virtually the same as those applied in Britain with the exception of certain types of aeration. Deep slitting is not known among the Superintendents I have met and most have said they would not even consider it. In my experience, I have achieved only good results in improving the rooting of Poa greens. I wonder if any of the UK manufacturers supply slitters to the US?

Overall, I have been very impressed by the greenkeeping standards in a somewhat less than hospitable environment. Approximately

90,000 nine hole rounds a year are played at Tiara Rado, so keeping pace with that is quite a challenge. The crew knows what to do and they get on with it. There are always plenty of ideas from the crew on how to improve the course, which are usually listened to by the Superintendent - he even let me rebuild a bunker face using the Scottish revetted turf face method, probably the only one in Colorado!

My experience of working with Americans is that they are hard working, diligent, say what they mean and respect the profession. I will be rehired after this winter break, so I take that as a compliment to British greenkeeping standards.

Meanwhile, 'Buddy' didn't show up again. Maybe I should call Bill. What the heck! The sun is shining, there is snow on the ski slopes and I need some exercise. I like America. I think I'll stay!

Paul is a former Head Greenkeeper at Cottesmore Golf Club, Leicestershire and owner of Rutland Golf Services, a greenkeeping contracting and supply company. Prior to that he was Head Greenkeeper at Laarbruch GC in Germany having arrived in Germany as a civil servant for British Forces Education Services. He is 41 married to Kelly Jo and they have a six month old baby girl called Rio.

