

Grand occasion



When I left the position of Head Greenkeeper at North Weald Golf Club in Essex to pursue further qualifications at Writtle College, I had no idea that I would be travelling around the USA to meet the superintendents of some of the best golf courses in America, let alone play some golf. It all happened when I applied for the Grand Tour Scholarship sponsored by Rain Bird International, founded by Bettina Schrickel. Several weeks after applying, Bettina rang me up to tell me that I had been successful in my application, and that I would be trav-

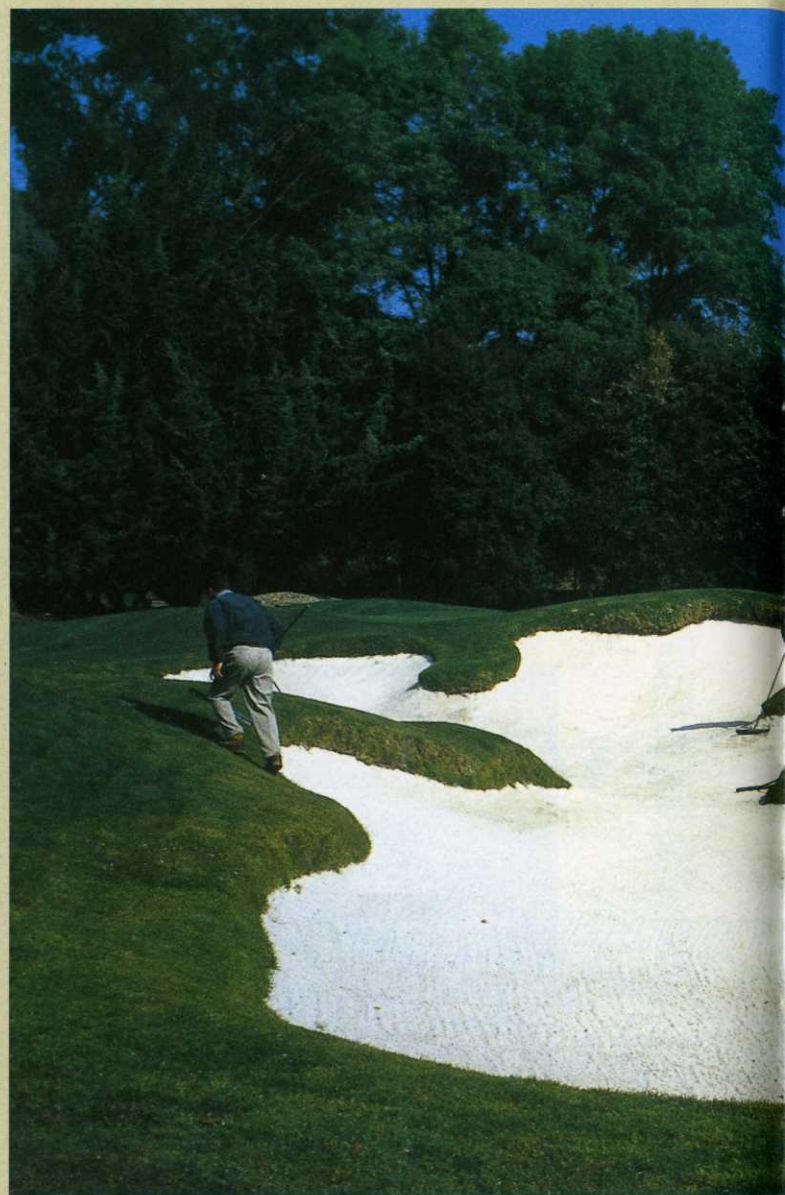
elling with Paul Mogford, an Australian golf course designer, at the beginning of April.

I arrived at Heathrow airport on an overcast Saturday morning for my flight to San Francisco and the beginning of the tour - 16000 miles, eight states, 21 golf clubs, and 23 days later I arrived back at Gatwick airport sporting a golden tan and a big Cheshire cat smile, but more valuable than that was the knowledge I had gained (the actual reason for going in the first place). A brief summary of my trip can be found on page 42.

One of the first problems encountered was the language barrier; it took a few days before I became accustomed to the names that they gave everything. With Smooth stalked meadow grass becoming (Kentucky) Blue grass, pedestrian mowers becoming walk mowers, etc...Then there was the Australian versions on top of that, with a strimmer (UK version), A.K.A. weed cutter (USA version), A.K.A. wipper snipper (Australian version).

My pre-conceived ideas of American golf courses were of those that you see on the telly, highly manicured and target golf, I was wrong. The majority of the courses played traditional chip and run, and only a few were highly manicured. It was interesting to see that a lot of the clubs were undertaking restoration projects to revert the evolved course back to its original design. As many of the courses were built in the golden age of course construction by eminent designers of the time (see table). Clubs such as Bel-air, Riviera, San Francisco, and Sourthen Hills have/are in the process of reverting their bunkers back to their original depth, shape, and mounding by using old photographs as a point of reference, and with the aid of a sympathetic designer/club professional. This was an area that all the superintendents enthused about, and their knowledge of their clubs history and original design was impressive.

It also raised an important issue, with golf courses being altered by the incumbent Club Captain or Head Greenkeeper wanting to leave their mark, these old masters will be lost forever, and in such a relatively short



period of time since their conception.

To bring the bunkers back into play, as originally intended, the match tees have either been extended back or new ones have been constructed. On some of the courses the use of a one to two inch polymer coating called "Bunker guard" was used too in the restored bunker to prevent erosion and reshaping that can occur over time through edge trimming and the play of golf.

Of all the courses that we visited, one common denominator was apparent, and that was that they all had wall-to-wall irrigation, everything was irrigated, even the rough. All the superintendents would tell me how many millions of gallons of water they used; in fact they could all use my annual consumption in one night! At first I thought that this was an obscene amount of water to use but after discussing with the superintendents about these amounts, all became clear. Depending on the area of the USA, the annual rainfall varied between 7-20 inches, but in most cases this rain came all at once over a two-month period in the wet season. This would account for their "Barrankas", a Spanish word for small canyons, which run through the

courses to catch and divert floodwater preventing it from causing any problems on the course. In fact some of the larger bunkers were called "Barranka bunkers". Anyway, this meant that the courses were without rainfall for ten months of the year, and given the high temperatures in the summer, irrigation even in the roughs was necessary.

This still may sound like a lot of water, but hardly any of the courses used potable water, as the majority irrigated with treated effluent water or well water. The level of treatment in the effluent water varied from secondary to tertiary treatments. The Pebble Beach Company actually has a main feed from the sewage company to its four courses, which is gravity fed. The pressure of which is so good that there is no need for a pumping system on any of the courses, except for a jockey pump on a high part of the course at Spyglass Hill Golf Club.

However, one problem with the treated effluent is that it builds up the salt levels in the rootzone due to its high sodium content. This has the effect of causing reverse osmosis on the grass plant, and therefore stressing it considerably. In the Monterey area, courses such as the Pebble Beach



Company and Cypress Point have restricted access to potable water, which they use on a rota basis between them to prevent pressure losses in the potable water system, to flush their greens once a month, lowering the salt build up. Other courses relied on the heavy rains, whereas some Superintendents found that flushing with the treated effluent actually helped remove some salt build up.

The irrigation regime of almost all the superintendents is to irrigate heavily and infrequently, although a lot of supplementary hand watering is necessary on dry spots and bunker banks (especially south facing). The greens are also syringed which is a light hand application into the air, literally misting the green, to lower the temperature of the grass by evaporation in the summer. This operation only takes about one minute for an average 500m² green, but may need to be carried out three-five times a day, even more on really hot days.

From the Los Angeles area onwards we came across warm season grasses, these were either Common bermuda (*Cynodon sp.*), Hybrid bermuda (*Cynodon sp.*), Kakuei (*Pennisetum*

clandestinum), or a mix of all three (Sanctuary and Desert Forest were the exceptions, as they had Creeping bent fairways). Some Superintendents preferred common; some were trying to make the transition from common to hybrid, while others encouraged Kakuei. Whatever the type, they had all managed to produce good playing surfaces. In fact Bel-Air Country club had just stripped and returfed the entire 17th fairway (a 449 yard par 4) with hybrid bermuda and put it back into play all in one week!

A problem with these warm season grasses is that once they get going they go, to the point where all the edging needs trimming once a week, buggy paths, pathways, bunkers, pop-ups, even the greens edges to stop the grasses encroaching onto the green. Other methods of stopping this encroachment onto the green varied from mild herbicides to a three-foot collar of 100% rye grass around the green. Some courses with newly constructed greens had a slot incorporated into the top of the non-porous membrane that lines the green, to facilitate accurate edging so that the shape of the green remains intact.



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Some of the golf clubs had a policy of overseeding the fairways on an annual basis with rye grass, to provide grass cover in the colder winter months as the warm season grasses go dormant. At the time of our visit the warm season grasses were just starting to recover from the winter, resulting in a transitional period from cool season to warm season grasses that lasts for a few weeks, giving a stressed/scruffy appearance. The courses that choose not to overseed are either the seasonal courses (i.e. closed over the winter period), or clubs that do not receive a lot of winter play. However, apart from the seasonal courses, all the courses have varying degrees of active growth with the cool season grasses through the winter.

One of the more unusual greens that we encountered was the 6th at Riviera Country Club, referred to by the greens staff as the doughnut green. This was a large green that had a sand bunker right in the middle of it! This green also suffered with shade from surrounding trees.

The Superintendent, Paul Ramina, has undertaken extensive tree work,

thinning the crowns and generally improving light levels around the green, even to the extent of using grow lamps, which Paul says has improved the condition of the sward dramatically. The lights are removed for tournament play, but are generally used through the day as much as possible. Other unusual sights were the par five 16th at Oak Tree Golf Club that had a hangman's noose hanging from a tree near to the green. This is for any golfers to feel free to top themselves if they have a disastrous score on this hole, like Jack Nicklaus who took a 12 in the 1988 PGA. Lightening shelters featured at

Sanctuary Golf Club and Cherry Hills Golf Club as they have their fair share of lightening during the summer. The trees that came into play or bordered the tees and greens also had lightening earthing straps to minimise the risk of damage to the trees and golfers.

There are so many other interesting points that I learned during the tour that I could probably write a book on them, or at least my final year thesis. The experience of the tour has given me the opportunity to learn a great deal about the specific maintenance requirements for quite different growing conditions, ranging

from coastal and high altitude courses right through to desert courses. At every course visited, we were made to feel welcome, and the Superintendents were very forthcoming with information about their courses and individual maintenance regimes. I was very impressed with their expertise and professionalism and the very high standards that they achieved.

The Grand Tour Scholarship is one of those once in a lifetime opportunities, which I would recommend anyone to apply for, and given the chance I would do it all again.

Colin Mumford



Schedule of Grand Tour

State	Course	Designer/Year Constructed
California	San Francisco Golf Club	A.W. Tillinghast, 1918
	Pasatiempo Golf Club	Alister Mackenzie, 1923
	Pebble Beach Golf Links	J. Neville/D. Grant, 1919
	The Links at Spanish Bay	Robert Trent Jones Jr, 1992
	Spyglass Hill Golf Course	Robert Trent Jones, 1966
	Cypress Point Golf Club	Alister Mackenzie, 1928
	Los Angeles Country Club	George.C. Thomas, 1922
	Bel-Air Country Club	George.C. Thomas, 1927
	Riviera Country Club	George.C. Thomas, 1927
Nevada	Shadow Creek Golf Club	Tom Fazio, 1990
Arizona	Forest Highlands Golf Club	Tom Weiskopf/Jay Morrish, 1987 + 1999
	Troon Golf & Country Club	Tom Weiskopf/Jay Morrish, 1986
	Desert Forest Golf Club	Red Lawrence, 1962
Utah	Just drove through	
Colorado	Castle Pines Golf Club	Jack Nicklaus, 1981
	Sanctuary Golf Club	Jim Engh, 1997
	Cherry Hills Golf Club	William Flynn, 1923
Kansas	Prairie Dunes Golf Club	Perry Maxwell, 1937
Oklahoma	Southern Hills Country Club	Perry Maxwell, 1936
	Oak Tree Country Club	Pete Dye
	Oak Tree Golf Club	Pete Dye, 1976
Texas	Colonial Country Club	John Bredemus, 1936