

# Golf's Sweetspot

Bernhard's Scholarship Delegate Will Bowden reports on a successful trip to San Diego

On Sunday the 8th of February at about 12 pm the 10 successful applicants of the 2004 Bernhard and Co. BIGGA delegation left London Gatwick, and embarked upon almost 13 hours of travel en route to San Diego and the 75th GCSAA Tradeshow and Conference.



▲ Of special interest was the wastewater wash down area in operation

It's fair to say that the many hours of flying took their toll on most of the delegates. However much of our tiredness was swept aside by the impressive sight of an illuminated San Diego as we descended in to the city's airport at about 7.30pm local time.

Immediately the grey, drizzly England we had left behind became a distant memory as we stepped off the plane and in to a place of palm trees and suntans!

We were met by the Bernhard team and a local taxi driver who insisted we were Australian, his only reason for this being that Melbourne was the only city he'd ever visited outside the US and therefore we must be Australian!

We were taken to our hotel which was situated in the district known as Mission Valley, a short shuttle-bus ride from the conference centre.

The next morning we awoke to glorious sunshine and clear blue skies.

San Diego is just 50 miles North of the Mexican border, it's the sixth largest city in America and the place where Americans like to holiday most! The area is rich in cultural, geographical and climatic variety.

There are four different climate zones: coastal, inland (where summer temperatures often exceed 90c), mountain and desert. With a population of 2.8 million San Diego benefits from a temperate climate averaging just 15 wet days a year. (a bit like Manchester!) During our stay temperatures averaged about 66f.

From a golfing perspective there are approximately 90 golf clubs in the area, equally divided between private and public.

Our week began with an eight hour educational seminar entitled: 'Turfgrass Stress Management'. The lecturers were Karl Danneberger and Joseph M. DiPaola.

The seminar focused on the various cultural systems and turf responses to environmental, cultural and biotic stress conditions. The aim was to highlight various methods of preventing or minimising stress injury to turf.

The topics ranged from the intensive use of PGR's in the battle to reduce Poa infestation, through to strategies for reducing the occurrence of summer dry patch and even methods to eliminate tissue damage from winter chilling stress.



▲ Pictured are the members of the delegation with Jose Garcia on one of the greens

Not all the information could easily be applied to our situation in Northern Europe. Elements of the presentation were interesting, not least when we were assigned group tasks.

This allowed us to discuss among our American colleagues typical maintenance strategies both in the UK and US. Some of the philosophies and levels of detail were eye opening to say the least!

The following day of the tour was one of the most memorable. We were taken on a field trip to two destinations in the area. Accompanied by Stephen and Sam and the rest of the Bernhard team our first stop was the Golf Club of California, an impressive facility situated just 25 minutes from downtown San Diego.

The course was opened in 2002 and designed by an American architect called Johny Pott. The primary objective was to create a layout that would integrate naturally in to its surrounding environment. Upon arrival we were greeted by the Course Superintendent, Jose Garcia. We were immediately impressed by his new maintenance facility and its level of cleanliness.

The course was young in establishment, however the pure bent greens were impressive as they felt firm and responsive under foot. Designed for the higher end of the market the club has a limited membership of just 160 and impacts approximately 10,000 rounds per year.

Jose explained how he had an operating budget of \$1.3million per year and a staff in excess of 20. Some of these statistics were put into perspective when he claimed that 20% of his budget went on water and power supplies with a staggering \$15,000 per night for water in times of extended drought! It was also surprising to hear that in the two years he had been working at the club, he had taken just three days holiday.

Also interesting was the method of Poa control being employed on the course. It was noticeable that the fairways took on a light brown tinge, this was in part due to the transition of the Bermuda grass, but also the application of diluted paraquat to all fairways and approaches. This is a practice used extensively in the US and with increasing frequency in Britain.

After leaving the Golf Club of California we travelled to the Taylor Made and Adidas Headquarters. Here we were shown around this impressive facility



by the Superintendent Patrick Waymire. The facility not only provides an exclusive club fitting and swing analysis service for some of the World's top players, but also produces every Taylor Made club distributed throughout the World at its assembly plant.

Over 600 employees assemble and pack each club in approximately two to three minutes churning out 20,000 clubs every day! The shop floor spanned over 220,000 sq.ft. with the atmosphere inside the workshop being intense to say the least.

Aside to just club production, the facility also has its own ball testing laboratory and an extensive practice facility of which Patrick was in charge.

As we toured his workplace we soon became united in the conclusion that his was without doubt THE best job in the World!

With a three man team under him and a budget in excess of \$160,000/yr to look after just 10 acres of turf. Added to this were the perks; \$2000/yr golf equipment and apparel allowance, new clubs every season, free health insurance, free meals, no weekend work and a new fleet of machinery almost every year! On top of this we were told how Patrick had just negotiated a years free trial of fertiliser. I think its fair to say he will be going no where fast!

The practice facility encompassed: One driving range, two putting greens (both Bent/Poa) and three bunkers. Patrick had previously worked as a Course Superintendent but he was without a doubt the most laid back man we'd meet on our trip!

Toward the end of our visit we were fortunate to bump into John Daly. The immediate thought of the group was for a team photo. However all notions of this were cast aside as soon as Paul Jenkins decided to introduce himself as the person who'd been the bunker raker for Daly during The Open.

Unfortunately it conspired that Daly had that day visited just about every bunker on the Royal St. George's while on his way to shooting himself out of the Championship. Not a particularly cherished association. Consequently I have a very distant shot of John Daly's behind as he strode away from us... Cheers Paul!

The week was passing us by and by Wednesday we were just getting acclimatised to the Californian weather. We spent the day as part of a Turfgrass field seminar which took us on a pit-stop tour of a range of facilities in the area.

First stop was the newly constructed home of the San Diego Baseball team, the San Diego Padres. The facility, known as Pecto Park, was 90% complete and not due to open until March. It was quite an experience for the group as many of us had never stepped foot inside a baseball stadium before.

We then moved on to the Del Mar race track, where we gained an interesting insight into the various maintenance and damage limitation techniques employed to maintain turf on a race track that is in use for up to 80% of the year.

In the afternoon we were treated to visits to two of the region's most prestigious golf courses: The Bridges Golf Club in Santa Fe, and The Fairbanks Ranch Country Club.

The Bridges Golf Club is described in their literature as 'A place lost in

time'. The concept was to create a little piece of Tuscany in California! The results were surprisingly impressive, with an intimidating Tuscan' style Clubhouse overlooking an awe-inspiring golf course.

The course was opened in 1999 and designed by Robert Trent-Jones Jr. A full time staff of 32 (that swells to 45 in summer) intensively manicure its 300 acres of immaculate turf. The greens were particularly impressive, sown as a G-6 Bentgrass and taking up a total of three acres they are maintained to stimp all year round at 9.5-10.5 on the metre.

The fairways encompassed 26 acres of once, if again, immaculate turf. The TifwayII mix was dense and natural in colour. There was a policy of no overseeding with Rye, which is a unique concept in this climatic zone. The justification for this was pure playability, the members didn't mind the discoloration of the dormant Bermuda and preferred its all year round playing characteristics.

The Bridges derives its name from the two stress ribbon suspension bridges that link the 10th and 11th holes. These 285 foot bridges were only the second and third to be completed in the US. Among its 250 members is Phil Mickelson and with a substantial membership fee of \$380,000 per year and on top of this a monthly fee of \$1,000 its expected not to grow much higher!

What I think we all found refreshing was that this was not a typical run-of-the-mill American golf course. The Bridges is highly unique and really does sit well among its surrounding arid landscape.

To contrast we then visited The Fairbanks Ranch Golf and Country Club. Again a private members club with roughly 500 members who pay a fee of \$85,000 per year for the privilege.

Designed by Ted Robinson Snr, the Club opened in 1984 and among other things was a site for the equestrian endurance event in the 1984 summer Olympics. The course was built on a riverbed and placed on top of this was over one million yards of imported soil. This allowed the grade of the site to be raised by 20-30 feet in an effort to reduce the occurrence of seasonal flooding.

The primary reason for our visit to Fairbanks was that in the past the course has been irrigated with second grade well water which has an exceptionally high dissolved water content.

Under recommendation all tees, fairways and roughs were therefore overseeded with Seashore Paspalum grass (Excalibur). This was regarded as the only way of maintaining quality turf coverage under such high salt conditions.

The advantages were high wear tolerance, good summer colour and consistent density. The disadvantages were a long dormant season, a sensitivity to many herbicides and significant thatch accumulation.

Consequently the Superintendent is moving away from this species and introducing a more traditional Bermuda/Rye mix, with tall fescue roughs.

Aside from these issues the greens were some of the finest pure Poa annua surfaces imaginable. However with up to 36 staff on 27 holes and just under 35,000 rounds per year it was obvious why!



▲ The picture shows the effect this highly diluted application has in stressing out the Poa, whilst the surrounding Bermuda/Rye mix is unaffected



▲ Pictured is a typical hole at The Bridges. Taken from the tee with a carry over a scrubland ravine





▲ The group pictured at The Bridges

The following is a typical summary of the greens maintenance schedule at Fairbanks:

- Greens fed once a week with foliar feed.
- They receive 6-7lbs/sq.ft. of N and P/yr.
- PGR's applied weekly.
- Greens topdressed every three weeks.
- Verticut as required and rolled three times per week.
- Double cut and rolled for tournaments.

Leached every month during times of low rainfall and high irrigation months between June-November. (Leaching helps to maintain low soil salinity)  
Typical pest problems: Anthracnose, Rapid blight, and Fusarium.

The remaining three days were predominantly taken up by the show.

At 9am on the Thursday morning we attended the official opening session. The event was hosted by the then President Jon Maddern with golf commentator Jim Nantz as the featured speaker. During this one and a half hour session there were more backs slapped and proclamations of love made than in any episode of Dynasty I could remember!

This aside there is no doubt that the GCSAA have continually raised the bar in terms of their associations image and stature and as a result the members are justly proud.

The tradeshow was phenomenal, a total of 19,317 delegates attended with 684 exhibitors covering a floor space of 240,000 sq.ft.

It's hard to draw comparisons with our own show at Harrogate. We are poles apart in every sense. The media coverage of the event was intensive, Superintendents were being interviewed with the entire golf industry seemingly aware of the events importance.

The dress code of collars, no denim and no trainers was refreshing and the no smoking or drinking policies within the show were strictly enforced.

Exhibitors were both friendly and well informed, sadly many of the more innovative products in the stands were as yet unavailable in the UK. It was good to see two British colleagues represented at the show and of course the BIGGA stand, where Andy Campbell and the team were ever present to advise



▲ Pictured below the San Diego Convention Centre, home to the 75th GCSAA tradeshow



▲ A view from the Clubhouse at Fairbanks G&CC

visitors with any queries they may have had regarding the association.

On the Thursday evening Stephen Bernard hosted the Prestige Club Dinner which provided us all with a great forum to either catch up with old friends or make new ones, while enjoying a first class dinner.

We all took the opportunity to gain a further insight into the profession as it is in America and discuss a wide range of topics.

During the last day of the show many of us took the opportunity to drive out to Torrey Pines GC and watch the third round of the Buick Classic.

I believe those who went were fortunate to meet the Superintendent who showed them the facility and answered their questions relating to the staging of the event.

It was also a relief to see that "The Jenkins' Curse" was not repeating on John Daly, as he eagled the last to set up a famous victory and banish the memories of Royal St George's forever!

As the week came to an end it was clear that we all took different experiences from the tour. We were all astounded by the style of greenkeeping 'stateside' but we were also impressed by the general image and obvious high regard the greenkeeping industry enjoys in America.

On a personal note one of the most memorable moments for me came on the last day of the show when we attended a seminar focussing on how a golf course should be set up to host a major event.

In attendance was the esteemed golf course architect Rees Jones. When he was asked what his views were on the future management of golf courses he replied: "Brown is good, we need to get out of this Augusta Syndrome and start producing sustainable golf courses with firm, fast surfaces"....wise words!

Finally I know all the delegates would like to thank Stephen and Sam for all their efforts, plus of course Kim and the other Bernhard staff who helped make our stay so special. Our thanks also to BIGGA and their support to the delegation. This is an opportunity, that as members, we should all take advantage of and I would urge others to apply for the Scholarship later this year!



▲ Pictured are a couple of the tour delegates benefiting from a practical demonstration from one of the Bernhard staff