

# My Week as a BIGGA Delegate

Mike Gash reviews his trip to America and the GCSAA Show through the BIGGA Delegation, sponsored by Bernhard.



The journey started back in August 2004 with the wrap round on the magazine. Thinking this is only for Course Managers, Master Greenkeepers (MG's) and members of Regional and National Board Members/Committees, I still thought: "If your not in it, you can't win a place on it," and sent it back. I received a form back with five questions plus a request for a little personal information. I filled it out and sent it back, then, towards the end of October, I received a letter telling me I had been short listed and asking if I would attend an interview. A week after the interview I received another letter to say I was off to Orlando Florida. Game on!



I attended a ceremony at BTME to pick up the tickets and to meet the other nine guys who'd also been selected and meet other lucky attendees that had gone in previous years. They were there to talk of their experiences.

On a cold Sunday morning, the first week in February, we all met up at Gatwick Airport ready to jump on a Virgin flight bound for Orlando, Florida. With five hours time difference, on landing, it was a very nice sunny and warm 70 degree Sunday mid afternoon, the English weather was a distant memory.

After getting settled into the excellent hotel, which was to be home for the next seven nights, we were given details of the courses to which we will all visit first thing Monday morning.

## MONDAY

### Eagle Creek Golf Club

The first course was Eagle Creek Golf Club, a new 18 hole course, measuring 7,198, par 73 Championship public course. Designed by Howard Swan and Ron Garl, their concept was to design a course that had a European and American feel about it, this was an interesting concept and worked fairly well. The course had a nice open feel about it but, as American courses go, the obligatory homes on the boundaries are being developed as I write. This will also include two schools, a shopping mall and will virtually become another small town.

Buck, the Superintendent, had a budget of \$800,000 - nearly £500,000 - and spent \$135,000 - £75,000 - just on fertilisers. They had 45,000 rounds a year.

The one thing that made this course stand out from the rest was it had been sown with Mini-Verde, a high shoot density, ultra dwarf Bermuda grass, for production of high quality golf greens. It tolerates continuous

close mowing, about 2mm, has a dark green genetic colour and excellent low temperature colour retention. Mini-Verde will tolerate relatively high amounts of sodium and therefore is adapted for use with reclaimed water, it also tolerates soil pH levels from 5.5 to 9.0, but will perform best at pH 6.0 to 6.5, it also has few pest problems, which is useful in the US.

The club is also proud of its five par 5's, to this it has five tees per hole, all square.

It had over 90 bunkers, some resembling Scottish reverted bunkers, which didn't quite look at their best, something to do with the temperature and construction I think.

The clubhouse was equally as good, designed to mimic a vintage New England manor with a European feel. The complex has already received five accolades within 12 months of opening, quite an achievement, especially as there are about 200 courses within a 45 minute drive of Orlando. Our thanks to Buckner Marlon, the Superintendent, for taking the time to answer all are questions and to Howard Swan for the guided tour.

## Grande Pines Golf Club

This was the second course of the day, redesigned by Steve Smyers and Nick Faldo, within the last couple of years. This undulating course with very sloping greens was challenging, especially with six large lakes, the course measured 6776 from the back, par 72. This course has also received numerous accolades from Golf Week's 100 Greatest Modern Courses.

## TUESDAY

We were scheduled to attend a Communication Seminar at the Convention Centre, this ran from 8am until 5pm. Presented by Mike Jousan, this seminar covered Philosophy and Principles of Communication, Specific Communication Skills, Negotiating and Selling Your Ideas and Handling Difficult Questions. This was an excellent day and I am glad to say seven out of the ten strong contingent stood up and held their ground. These Americans aren't that keen on coming forward and we flew the flag. It was also nice to see a fellow Brit, not part of the BIGGA Delegation, though Murray Long, from Coombe Hill Golf Club, who also joined in.

## WEDNESDAY

This bought another seminar, a Field Trip visiting three Florida Courses and a wetland project.

## Hawk's Landing Golf Club

The first course of the day was Hawk's Landing Golf Club, reputed to be the Marriott's flagship course. Director of Grounds was John Kopack and this course was built in 1986 by Jo Lee, but was redesigned with the whole course being dug up and re-laid in 1998 by Robert E Cupp. It's now standing at 6800 yards, par 72, with water being in play for 15 of those holes. All of the greens were seeded with Tiff Dwarf during the winter.

The course had been heavily over seeded, except the rough, throughout the year they sprayed virtually every week with a cocktail of liquid fertiliser, fungicide, herbicide or wetting agent, the fertiliser was mainly fed through the irrigation system, which is reclaimed water.

They had 40,000 rounds a year, one year the club let it increase to 50,000 and found the course couldn't cope with the amount of play, even with a crew of 55 staff. This course was unique because they had a plant holding area where they grow their own plants, mainly bedding. They also prepared their own hanging baskets, 300 of them, which got replaced quarterly and sold the replaced plants to the locals as a side line business.

### Championsgate Golf Club

This was the second course we visited and the Superintendent was Bobby Ellis, a former GCSAA President. Championsgate GC is home to two unique 18 hole Championship golf courses, designed by Greg Norman, this is also the David Leadbetter Academy.

The first course, the National, is a typical American style, standing at 7128, par 72, off the backs.

The second, the International, course was designed to resemble the coastal wind swept dune courses of Australian and the British Isles, also standing at 7363, par 72. The whole resort is set in about 1500 acres plus. The courses are designed to collect all of the excess water from the Kissimmee area. This water was pumped into rectangular percolation basins called Rapid Infiltration Basins - RIBS - one rib was five acres in size, the whole site can cope with 12 million gallons, about seven days of continuous water. That's 1.8 million gallons a day, during summer and one million per day during winter.

The percolation rate in these Ribs was 100mm per hour, water testing is done quarterly, it still costs the club \$70,000 - £40,000 - a year to extract for irrigation, tissue testing is done monthly due to high salt content. The course has 44 staff and with an annual budget of \$1.8 million dollars. They have projected 90,000 rounds a year but are only up to 65,000 at a cost of \$215 - £120 - a round. Out of the 65,000 rounds, 40,000 are played in the first three months of the year, the other 25,000 in the remaining nine months.



The BIGGA Delegation

Bobby also does a lot of testing with different grasses, by overseeding about 14 different greens: mainly the par 3 course, this enables him to experiment and see which grasses are for their course, he also has a 26-acre practice area.

This is another course earmarked for development with condos and homes dotted in and a round the course this will only boost the already \$6.8million dollars a year turnover.

### Wetland Mitigation

This was an area of wetland about 3.4 acres, it did actually connect to a river down stream somewhere. The idea was to set up a planting area of native wetland grasses and trees on the edge of this wetland, if they did that it could be protected by a conservation order and no one was allowed to fill it in and build on it, as like the surrounding area, which was actually ear marked for major development.

The people involved with this conservation project were Kelly Peterman, Senior Ecologist, and Mike Green, Natural Resource Professional.

### Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort

The Superintendent at the course was Thomas J Schlick. This tour mainly concentrated on the ornamental planting and the grasslands in and around the hotel grounds, this included the flowers, bedding and pot plants.

Because of the sheer expanse of the resort the planting, i.e. bedding and pot plants, were changed five times a year, which is a hell of a task especially with 100,000sqft of flower borders and over a hundred pot plants not quite the 8in size either.

They had 30 staff just to maintain the interior and exterior planting and half of that number looked after the St Augustine grass and the trees around the hotel grounds. The operation budget for just the landscaping, i.e. exterior planting, was \$1.565,000 and the interior planting was \$118,000 and that's not including the golf course budget, which incidentally was \$1.400,000. What a dream to have a running budget of just over \$3million dollars!

But the main item we all wanted to see was the course and maintenance facilities. Well, what could I say about the maintenance sheds apart from absolutely fantastic.





The locker room for the staff was better than most member locker rooms in the UK. There was not a speck of dirt anywhere, and I mean anywhere, from the chemical store to the Superintendent's office, which looked like a DFS lounge mock up. All the machines were spotless, unbelievable if I hadn't seen it for myself.

#### THURSDAY

The first day of the official show, we all went to the opening session. Apart from the usual thank you's for those few stepping down and the new ones coming on board the opening session was slightly overshadowed by one man.

He was being honoured by receiving the converted Old Tom Morris Award that was the Golden Bear himself Jack Nicklaus. He gave a talk and did an interview for the Golf Channel, which was being recorded for a later date. He also gave a question and answer session. That was one of the highlights of the day.

After that was over we went to the show. Yet again another very impressive setting, there was about 830 exhibitors showing of their latest products, they had 270,360sqft of exhibition hall to cover, bearing in mind that is all in one room.

They were expecting 25,000 to 28,000 people to visit the show, before that there was already 7,329 people who attend the education seminars and I don't know how many entered the golf tournament that was played over five top Orlando courses over three days.

The show was categorised into seven main areas; the building of a green, agronomic solutions, clubhouse solutions, driving range, electric vehicle test track, equipment and maintenance, and water solutions. This was the first ever building of a green in the middle of an exhibition, it was built to full USGA spec, probably about 300m2 with all the surrounds. Turfing could have been better, though.

That evening bought one of our first big engagements, the President's Dinner, hosted and sponsored by Stephen Bernhard. This involved meeting and dining with some of America's top 100 Superintendents and some of the GCSAA hierarchy.

This was an evening not to forget, the networking potential was enormous, we all met so many inspirational people and by the end of the evening we had made some new friends.



#### FRIDAY

This was another day at the show, meeting up with reps and fellow UK greenkeepers and college lecturers, including a certain Wayne Roberts, from Myerscough. That evening we were to attend another reception to see the old President, Mark Woodward, handing over to Tim O'Neill, the new GCSAA President. By the way, congratulations to Mark on his new appointment in San Diego. Good luck.

#### SATURDAY

We had finished off at the show because it closed at 2pm, so just time to pick up a few bargains at the GCSAA retail shop, after the show a little retail therapy at one of the many retail outlets. That night most of us went to downtown Orlando to see a free open air concert by Bruce Hornsby and the Range, an 80's group if your wondering from around '86 with a number one hit "The way it is" and many others. Thanks to Sami, from BIGGA, for hearing where they were playing.

#### SPECIAL THANKS

I would like to thank Stephen Bernhard for his support in sponsoring us all, also Sam, Kim and all of the Bernhard crew, thanks everyone for making it a great trip.

Also, to all the fellow cricketers who travelled with me. You all made it an unforgettable week, also thanks to John Pemberton, Sami, and Rosie. Nice to see you all in action; Howard Swan for making the first day so enjoyable. Finally congratulations to Chris Maynard for his new appointment at Pirates Cove.

*My personal thanks to all of you.*



◀ Chris Maynard, of The London Golf Club, one of the ten BIGGA Delegates tries out some of the new technology and equipment at the GCSAA Show in Orlando, Florida