

# The Grass is Whiter on the Other Side

Chris Dyke dons his wellies and takes a look at Riederalp Golf Club in Switzerland.

Most greenkeepers I meet have a mixed attitude to snow. On the one hand it is one of the few things that brings mowing to a halt. On the other, snow lying for some time brings its own crop of diseases and can knock a hole in the club's finances. So this winter give a few moments thought to the greenkeeping team at Riederalp in Switzerland.

Riederalp lies at 8,000 feet on the south facing side of the Alps, not far from the world renowned ski centre of Zermatt. From sometime in early November their course will disappear under snow not to be seen again until next May. This is not a sprinkling. At its worst we are talking about three metres of snow. The top is used for six months by skiers and snowploughs going to and from the ski runs.

Riederalp is a pointer to the boom in golf in Switzerland, which has seen the number of courses treble in recent years. This expansion is riding on increased numbers of summer visitors wanting to pursue their golfing hobby while in the Alps. It also offers an extra source of income to skiing resorts in the relatively lean summer months.

The nine hole course lies in a shallow basin in the middle of the village with an amazing view of the mountains across the valley. Created out of former grazing land the course includes several converted Swiss style farmhouses and a nuclear bunker for storing equipment and stores. The idea of a course was put forward in the early 1990s by a local hotelier who enjoyed playing golf.

Along with several others, he bought up the by then redundant farmland and began the transformation. As usual there was some early resistance but now most residents see the course as having saved the centre of the village from hotel developments.

"The best situation is when the snow falls in early November and stays there until the spring. The snow blanket protects the greens in the winter. The real problems come in the spring. It is best if the snow melts in one rush and stays away. We then start a programme of oversowing the greens and feeding to get a quick recovery," explained Willy Kummer, Head Greenkeeper, regarding his approach to coping with the snow.

"This is a very sunny position so growth can be very quick, especially with the ground quite wet and good rainfall. The problem is the spring weather can be very unreliable. We can have good initial germination and then two nights of minus 20 deg C and we lose everything. In a bad year this can be repeated several times."

Contrary to what I expected, there is no policy of treating the greens with fungicide before the winter. Willy has seen no appreciable difference when he tried this in earlier years. It is really a case of intensive renovation, fresh seed and luck.

I was surprised at this quick recovery since a few years earlier I visited a museum several hundred feet above the village and was shown how slow grass and trees grow in this area. The tracks of a small bulldozer used in a building job were still visible after three years, painfully slow growth by the grass trying to cover the bare areas.

There are also hundred years old pine trees barely two metres tall. The reason the greens recover so well is the exceptional sunshine and good rainfall in the village itself, which in summer is more like Italy. Having said that this region can get snow in any month of the year, which brings a different meaning to sweeping the greens.



The equipment and resources used by the club are the same as anywhere else in Europe. Golf is fairly new to Switzerland so there are very few home grown manufacturers of equipment and supplies. For example it is only in recent years that seed has been available from local suppliers. The next oddity is that the village and the course are in a vehicle free area. There are no cars and no usable road to the valley below.

All supplies, including equipment and even bunker sand, are brought up slung under the cable car. Imagine how long it took to stock the bunkers with 25kgs sacks and a maximum load of one ton at a time. At least the cable car station is only a few yards from the clubhouse and depot.

"Transport adds 40% to the cost of all our materials, which only travel two miles on the lift," said Willy.

For training and expertise the club had to look to Germany in its early days. The staff were trained in Northern Germany with the first national training course only recently started. Not surprisingly Willy and his team like to travel to pick up ideas. This year they were in Ireland for a few days. The course has five greenkeepers working full time in the playing season.

That brings us to the final difference to UK courses. There is a limit to the amount of machinery maintenance and equipment polishing you can do in the winter. Especially if the course's shut down period lasts five months. Come December Willy and his team switch hats. Willy manages the local ski school and most of his staff are either skiing instructors or lift attendants.

Talking to Willy I could appreciate what this means when we talked about holidays. In the summer the course is going flat out. In the winter the skiing takes up all your time. As a result the staff usually look to take their holidays in November or at the end of the ski season. That is assuming the snow melts on schedule and not a month early!

Recent changes to employment rules in Switzerland mean British greenkeeping staff can now work in Switzerland without too much hassle. So if you are tired of our grey skies, here is a country crying out for experienced staff. Just don't forget to find something else to do in the winter!