

# Life as a greenkeeper on the other side

Leaving home for a far away country is never easy, and even more difficult when the destination is one that for many years you have felt sceptical about. That is how it was when I left to embark on an internship in the US with the Communicating for Agriculture Exchange Program. (Part of an international student exchange and training programme by The Toro Company.)

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Ever since I had entered the turf industry I had seen the 'green monster' that was the US turf industry. How could they justify the use of such huge volumes of chemicals? Why didn't they see the link between the apparent excess of fertiliser application and the necessity for these chemicals? I came to the conclusion that the best way to understand the system used in the US was to work in it myself.



1st Green at Midland Hills C.C.

Therefore in April 2004 I left for the US to begin a placement at Midland Hills Country Club, in St Paul, Minnesota. A Seth Raynor design, formed in 1920, this club has been described as the 'hidden jewel' of the twin cities of St Paul and Minneapolis. Initial impressions were no let down. Set in the perfect rolling terrain that course designers dream of, the course rolls smoothly from one hole to the next. A beautiful golf course, if anything only lacking in the long roughs that define the upland and moorland courses this side of the Atlantic.

The first thing that struck me on arrival at Midland Hills (from a turf management perspective) was the number of employees and likewise the range and quantity of machinery owned by the golf course. It would soon become apparent how necessary this volume of equipment was. I was given a few days to settle in to life in America, but was keen to get started at work. I had arrived the week before aeration was scheduled to take place and this would be the first real taste of the American maintenance machine. All playing surfaces were aerated using four Toro walker aerators for the greens and tees and two Toro tractor-mounted aerators for the greens. This was far beyond anything I had experienced in the UK and was a sign of how things would continue.

Much of the work through the summer was as could be expected - the daily maintenance of the course was much more exaggerated than here in the UK. However, it was clear that this was just a different way of doing things. Much of my animosity towards the 'green monster' to which I referred earlier diminished as I came to understand the system in which I was working. The American maintenance system (as with much of the social and economic system) is fuelled and in many ways controlled by demand. Perfect conditions are expected year-round and the golf course management crew strive to meet the expectations of the golfers. It became clear that many of what we in this country view as excesses in US maintenance are in fact necessities due to the golfers' demands.

Most interesting in the Midwest states of America is the weather, with extreme cold and snow present for months at a time. With the golf courses closed for long periods from November through March, the management approach has to be altered drastically. In England we are lucky in many ways that we do not get the extremes of weather present in some parts of the US. Construction work in Minnesota must be carried out throughout the season - a prospect that would frighten many of the members of golf courses in the UK. The staffing levels present make this more feasible, although the extra work did add to the already hectic management schedule.

The most striking time of the year in Minnesota would be the autumn. Leaf fall from the trees lining the fairways would cover entire areas. For a period of weeks leaf blowing and mulching was carried out on a daily basis including weekends. Scenes such as those in the picture were common. Incidentally, many of the tree specimens that were primarily the cause of the leaf issues were enormous compared to UK specimens.



A sea of leaves surrounding two maple trees

By Barry Wright



The dormant surrounds to bunkers provide a stunning contrast. The ingress of the cool season grasses is clear

One of the most amazing things about the US is the huge variation between different climates across the country.

With the winter coming in fast in Minneapolis, I looked towards the south to continue my education and understanding of the US system. For this, I moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where I found placement at the Turtle Point Club at Kiawah Island Golf Resort. This course had been designed in 1981 by Jack Nicholas and was redeveloped in 2000 by Jack Nicholas again. Much of the redesign involved updating the original constructions, implementing USGA greens and renovating bunkers.

As I arrived at Kiawah in January, the Bermuda and Zoysia grasses were in their dormant stage. The most striking thing about this time is the areas that are not overseeded, such as bunker faces and areas of Zoysia grass (which incidentally does not respond well to overseeding as it will struggle with the transition for the summer). This resulted in a large use of chemical throughout the months where the warm season grasses were dormant, with the need to control the ingress of the cool season grasses into these areas. While these grasses would quickly be replaced by the warm season grasses in the summer, it was important to keep the course as perfect as possible at all times.

Much remained the same with the level of staffing and quantity and variety of machinery.

The most notable similarity was the expectations of the resort management. Being a resort, much of the play is of the pay-and-play type, but this did not reduce the expectations of perfection. In fact, in many ways this only increased expectations - especially with the attachment of the name Kiawah Island. One of the more admirable attitudes was the intention to retain a good sward rather than continually striving for high green speeds. If only this could be accepted worldwide.

The fertiliser and water usage at Turtle Point was phenomenal. However, it was necessary. With temperatures around 95°F (35°C) with 95 per cent humidity for long periods through the summer, turf would not survive without the maintenance that is practised. The geology of Kiawah Island also added to that necessity. Kiawah Island is essentially an enlarged sand bank - low nutrition and high infiltration present across the island. Thus high fertiliser usage. The water was backed off a little during

the transition period, although the fertiliser levels were stepped up in order to try to promote the Bermuda grass, which would quickly take over once conditions were favourable.

One of the biggest criticisms of US golf course maintenance is the lack of definition that is given by the long roughs we have here in England. I noted this at the beginning of the article. However, in my time in the US I began to see how US golf courses have other forms of definition, as do the parkland courses in this country. The lower heights of cut of the roughs are necessary with the desire of the clientèle to have a green golf course with a perfect sward throughout.

This desire, of course, results in the increased levels of maintenance and the

greater use of chemicals and larger applications of water. With this increase in maintenance also comes a bigger need for labour, much of which is increasingly being provided by Hispanic labourers (often Mexican).

While we may in this country find the Americans' approach to golf course management alien, I found that the differences are primarily due to one aspect - the golf course maintenance aim is above all to provide what the clientèle demands. Perfection. Green perfection at that!



*Barry Wright was a trainee greenkeeper with a BSc from Myerscough when he joined the programme. He spent 18 months from April 2004 until September 2005 on work placements under the Toro scheme.*

*Greenkeepers interested in finding out more about the opportunities afforded by this programme can contact Bruce Jamieson on 01252 844847 or email him at [brucejamieson@compuserve.com](mailto:brucejamieson@compuserve.com) to qualify, you will need to have two to three years greenkeeping experience and a desire to make greenkeeping your chosen career.*