



# TURNING JAPANESE

*Laurence Pithie reports from the inaugural Greenkeeper Conference and Show in Japan*

**In February this year, I had the pleasure of returning to Japan, this time as an invited speaker for the inaugural National Greenkeeper Conference & Trade Show. This article also acts as a follow-up to the ones produced in GI in 2006.**

The NGK Conference was held in Kobe, a port city 300 miles west of Tokyo. This is a large city, previously devastated by an earthquake in January 1995. Apart from a memorial and a small section of seafront which serves as a reminder, it is hard to find any remains of the chaos and damage that ensued. The Conference was organised by Pacific Golf Management, one of two large management companies in Japan which either own or operate around 250 golf courses; this representing about 10% of the golf courses in Japan. With support from International companies such as Toro, Jacobsen, John Deere, Syngenta and Bernhards, there was representation from 'local' companies such as GK, ASI & Riken Green to name a few. The Trade Show was small in comparison to both BTME & GIS but it was a first and about 40 exhibitors were present plus media coverage from within Japan. Jim Prusa, an ex GCSAA executive, Mike Heacock & Steve Wilson, all from PGM were the principle organisers and superbly aided by a host of Course Managers and interpreters.

The main objective for this Conference was to try and bring about change. In Japan, there is no greenkeeping education system, no association and therefore very little sharing of information. Networking between individuals is next to non-existent with the result that many 'keepers' work in isolation

from each other. With minimal external influence, the greenkeepers have a limited understanding of conditions or techniques outside of Japan. Most of the knowledge gained has largely been from the US. However, it must be stated that golf course condition and presentation is still of a high standard and as I said in the previous article, it probably falls somewhere between that of the UK and the US. Staffing levels and budgets are of course much higher than the majority of clubs in the UK and service standards are as good as any I have witnessed during my travels.

Conference week started on the Sunday with a ceremonial opening performed by a strange mix of a Scottish marching band of pipes & drums, young & old, led by a Samurai warrior. This representing the link between the home of golf and that of an enlarging golf market in Asia. Introductions were read out by Jim Prusa, the pride of place being from Gordon Moir, from St. Andrews, followed by encouraging letters from both BIGGA & the GCSAA, a nice touch. Such camaraderie within the golf industry is the essence of what makes this such a special industry and helps unite Greenkeepers from all corners of the globe. Locally run Seminars covering a variety of subjects such as 'converting Korai greens to Bentgrass' followed over a two day period.

Afterwards and on Monday evening, the Trade Show was formally opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony performed by various dignitaries. The main day of the Trade Show was on Tuesday which attracted a steady flow of interested visitors. A keynote speech by Marty Kuehnert, a well known Baseball Team manager and presenter in Japan, ended the day's session.



His presentation in fluent Japanese was very good and relevant to the challenges faced today.

Wednesday was leisure day during the Conference week, with over 120 delegates heading into the mountains to play in an organised golf tournament. Near blizzard conditions greeted our arrival as we made our ascent in five coaches from Osaka. To say that the course was challenging was an understatement. The 36 hole Daitakarazuka course was re-modelled under the guidance of David Dale, an accomplished architect who for many years worked with Ron Fream. This was not only a test of architecture but a feat of engineering, especially to install a full length cart path around all 36 holes. The changes in elevation were considerable and to walk this course would not be feasible. During the round, several brief snow showers were encountered and earlier that morning, the staff moved overnight snow from some sheltered tees. All in all it was a wonderful experience and only three balls were lost to the mountains.

The last two days consisted of workshops with several subjects being covered. This time, there was more of an international mix of speakers from Japan, the US and Europe, the latter consisting of myself and Stephen Bernhard. Having presented numerous seminars and workshops over the past few years, I found this to be more of a challenge considering the inevitable language barrier. However, thanks to efficient technical support and assistance from two female interpreters who spoke excellent English, the whole day ran as smooth as any previously.

The subjects I presented consisted of a brief history of golf to where we are now, a UK overview, cultural practices and feeding programs, an environmental case study and finally the typical challenges and solutions encountered in the UK. All subjects covered were as a request from the organisers. Subjects covered by others included Golf Course Design, Basic Soil Science and Modern Golf Course Management. The main difference I found that due to the language barrier, it was difficult to interact with the

delegates and to gauge their feedback. The main Q&A tended to centre on the question of Poa annua and Environmental issues. The latter being more of a curiosity at this stage to the Japanese but one that they are becoming increasingly aware of.

I also had the opportunity to visit two other courses plus a driving range. The latter was most impressive, in spite of only being 200 yards long. It was fully enclosed and the structured netting is computer operated which can be lowered when typhoons hit the shoreline. The two tier driving range, complete with power tees, also featured overhead fans and heaters, plus comfortable chairs and tables complete with drinks holders. The target greens were composed of raised artificial types, with ball removal 'switch' which knocked the balls into the lower areas for automatic collection. This was most impressive and an integral restaurant serving excellent food made for a very enjoyable experience. A digi-card system was in use so the customer has several options on how many balls to purchase, what time of day suits best and the card can be used again if there are still balls remaining. All in all, this range was of a very high standard and more advanced than any I have seen in the UK.

The two other courses I visited were Ark Yokawa and Shinyu, both set into hillsides. All consisted of Zoysia, Korai on tees and fairways and Noshiha on surrounds and roughs. My previous articles alluded to the fact that this is a tough grass to cut and I can verify it is also tough to play from. Divots fragment but recovery is fast during the growing season. In the winter and as with all warm season grasses, Zoysia is completely dormant and both courses had the look of being wiped out with glyphosate although both were in fine condition and clean and tidy at that. The higher end courses tend to spray the fairways with a green dye colourant, complete with about 3% Iron which gives six to eight weeks benefit. Visually this is more attractive and is applied at 10lts per ha. Divoting of tees and fairways was almost a daily occurrence, but then mowing is virtually non-existent for at least four months. Soil temperatures need to be about 18 Celsius before the Zoysia greens up; this usually around late April in the main part of central Japan.



On all courses, the Bentgrass greens were firm and in general receive more frequent sand dressings than those in the UK. Of course feeding levels for Bent is higher, namely about 200 kgs per ha (20 gms per m<sup>2</sup> or roughly 3lbs N per 1000 sq ft). Due to the narrowness of many fairways in Japan, often barely 30 yards wide and with steep slopes on either side, many holes have internal boundaries or OB's as called in Japan. A local rule is then used to play another ball, complete with penalty shots from a marked area of the fairway. This is to help speed up play otherwise a round of golf could take all day.

Staffing levels average between 8 and 18 (depending on course standard) per 18 hole golf course, with virtually all greenkeepers in full time employment. Due to the social and moral responsibilities of clubs and companies in Japan, this is common and the payback is total loyalty and dedication. It was noticeable that very few young people work on golf courses, most preferring to work in the cities. Equipment levels are also higher than in the UK and maintenance buildings often twice the size as we are accustomed to.

Golf in Japan is as popular as ever but remains an expensive game. Few courses cost less than £80 per round although that often includes golf cart and lunch.

Since rounds in Japan often take 6 hours to play, it is common practice to play 9 holes, stop for lunch, then continue to play the back 9. A full day out on the course may not suit all tastes and as witnessed in the UK, the time taken to play golf is a key issue for customer retention.

The start made in hosting a first 'BTME' style conference will hopefully bring greenkeepers closer together and eventually lead an Association being formed, thereby bringing the benefits of education and the sharing of information. This is intended to be an annual event and looking at how quickly Japan has developed in other ways, there is every probability that this will happen. My thanks go the organisers of this event who will hopefully be visiting our shores in the near future.

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