

# WHY THREE U.S. SUPERINTENDENTS ARE STUDYING FOR MASTER GREENKEEPER...

Maureen Keepin reports

**Contenders from across the pond are due to start their studies towards Master Greenkeeper status. So what is the great appeal of this BIGGA qualification in helping them to manage courses Stateside?**

Following visits to Harrogate Week (BTME) and high profile golf courses in the UK, as part of the GCSAA delegation sponsored by Bernhard and Company, superintendents from the United States are keen to 'up' their professional standing by becoming Master Greenkeepers.

## Stephen Cohoon

A certified golf course superintendent in the US for 28 years Stephen Cohoon has spent the last nine years at Heritage Hunt Golf and Country Club in Gainesville, Virginia. A traditional 18-hole course, designed by Arthur Hills and built in 1999, the club currently has 350 members. In season 18 staff are employed to tend the 107 acres course with this reducing to 10 off-season.

## Why become a Master Greenkeeper?

Stephen said: "The ability to grow your education forward is great as you do not want to stand still in this business because everyone will pass you by.

"I see Master Greenkeeper as a great way to develop professionally and learn some new management practices.

"This qualification is recognised worldwide and several people in the States have accomplished it and inspired me."

Visiting the UK gave Stephen the 'extra boost' to take up the challenge, "This is the optimum in greenkeeping and what everyone should be inspired to achieve."

## Course aims

Speaking of his role at the club Stephen feels there have been massive benefits in the fact that he was involved in the original development of the course and given a free rein at that time.

His declared aim is to create and maintain the best facility he can by continually developing and improving areas.

One of his main focuses of attention relates to the selection of grass seed cultivars and he said: "Some of the newer creeping bent cultivar characteristics are particularly outstanding.

"We selected L-93 bentgrass for all of the greens, tees, and fairways because of its ability to withstand the cold winters and for its resilience in recovering from the hot humid summers."

There are extended periods in the summer

when the temperature is around 33 to 37°C with 80 to 90 percent humidity. In contrast winter temperatures dip as low as -12 to -15°C.

Irrigation is a key consideration in this area of the States. Summer months can often experience severe droughts, as recorded in 2007 when rainfall was 20 inches below the norm.

Stephen explained: "We are really in a difficult position in that it is too hot for cool season grasses and too cool for warm season ones.

"Water is therefore the vital key to keeping the grass in good shape."

Most of the irrigation water comes from storm water run-off. There is a system of six ponds which collect water – where it is either stored or gravity fed by a system of creeks and pipes to the irrigation pond. This system is supplemented by five wells, which are utilised during periods of extended drought.

One of the club's next aims is to create 11 acres of wetlands to encourage all bird and animal species and a wetland committee has already been appointed.

He said: "We are planting native grasses and perennial flowers as well as creating buffer areas around the golf course and storm water management ponds."

## Challenging issues

"Many environmental measures have been taken over the years but it is vital we now communicate this message to members and players who are seriously concerned about these issues," said Cohoon. Augusta National has a dramatic effect on US perceptions and as a result the expectations of his membership are high.

"Everyone admires Augusta course conditions on TV but few realise it is not that easy to achieve. All Augusta's management is built around and focused on that one week of championship golf and this is the very top of the game."

## Sean Sullivan

Putting the Master Greenkeeper process into action this year, Sean Sullivan is the certified golf course superintendent at The Briarwood in Billings, Montana, an area which has very little rainfall.

Covering 350 acres, the 18-hole privately owned club was built in 1982 and has 300 members. Designed by Bradford Benz and J. Michael Poellot staffing levels change with the seasons and school schedules.

In March to October there are six to 13 employees and from November to February three employees.

## Why Master Greenkeeper?

Sean explains why he is keen to study: "I am sure master greenkeeper will help me to be a better manager. With nine out of 10 golfers saying the condition of the course is their top priority it has to be mine too. And I feel studying for this qualification will help significantly in ensuring I create the best possible standards."

## Course aims

With two distinct designs, the front nine holes of the course are described as parkland with cottonwood trees following a creek running through the course. The back nine changes elevation dramatically through a series of hills and ridges, with a 350ft difference in the elevation at the lowest point on the front nine and the high spot of the back nine.

Currently using a 1960 vintage bedknife grinder from the Bernhard stable he added: "This area of the US is more unusual in that not every golf course owns a grinder, but you need to if you want the course to look its very best."

A key feature of his course is 54 black bunkers filled with coal slag, a by-product of burning lignite coal for power generation. "Samples of the material have been left in the UK with Stuart Yarwood, head greenkeeper at Lymm Golf Club."

The colour contrast between green grass and the black slag, in Sullivan's opinion is better than that of the white or neutral coloured sands.

Benefits include greater density, which prevents it blowing out of the bunkers even in winds of 50 to 60mph. Sean also cites reduced labour costs: "Because of its angular shape and black colour, weeds do not seem to grow in the bunkers and grass does not encroach into the edges. And minimal maintenance is required to return the coal slag back into the bunkers after being splashed out from wedge shots."

Billings is in the flood plain of the Yellowstone River and with rain and snow there is around 14 inches of moisture a year. This area is classed as semi-arid desert with very low humidity and water is essential to prevent areas turning into dirt.

Sourced from the Yellowstone River water is pumped along a 2.5-mile pipeline to the golf course, where it is stored in a 60 million gallon irrigation lake.

## Challenging issues

Sean cites establishing seed or sod on alkaline soils and finding enough employees to maintain the course during the growing season as some of the issues.

A major challenge at Briarwood is getting



US greenkeepers visiting BTME with Bernhard's Managing Director, Stephen Bernhard and BIGGA Past Chairman Billy McMillan

enough water to the golf course on a daily basis. More than one million gallons of water are used every night during the hot months – the temperature throughout the month of July averaging 96°F in 2007.

Water usage has been reduced by 30 per cent from 2006 to 2007 but still the club used 100 million gallons of water.

"We are installing a new pump station and looking at different types of grasses to help reduce this further," said Sean.

"The most important issue in the world of golf today is conserving and using water wisely."

**Rafael Barajas**

Situated just outside Los Angeles the Hacienda Golf Club was designed by Willie Watson in 1920. Hacienda is an old style golf course stretching at close to 7,000 yards from the back tees. Situated in a canyon in the city of La Habra Heights the course was designed using the natural terrain and is owned by its 400 membership. Here Barajas is certified golf course superintendent of the 18-hole course, which covers 187 acres, 100 of which are maintained.

Throughout the years many trees have been planted, making the course narrow and creating a lot of shaded areas that are challenging to maintain.

Hacienda has a team of 28 staff members to maintain the course, consistent with the expectations of the membership.

This includes Barajas, one assistant superintendent, a foreman, two mechanics for the upkeep of the maintenance fleet, one irrigation specialist, a spray technician, together with the remaining staff who perform various tasks.

**Why Master Greenkeeper?**

Always welcoming new challenges Rafael Barajas is looking forward to his studies for the BIGGA qualification of master greenkeeper: "Meeting the requirements of the master greenkeeper programme may be challenging but I hope it will motivate others to follow. This can only serve to make the industry stronger."

A key motivation in greenkeeping for Rafael is mentoring young professionals and he feels this qualification will make a dramatic difference and assist him in this role. "I really want to encourage them to be better communicators within the golf community."

**Course aims**

Now in his 13th year at the club he is aiming to bring the golf course up to the next level by creating even greater consistency and raising the threshold for standards.

"Our aim is to provide the right product and improve facilities. We are mowing to get a good consistency across the fairways, greens and tees and I am looking into a new sharpening system to improve course presentation further."

In 2005 the golf course went through an extensive renovation project of all the greens, bunkers and some tees to lengthen the golf course yardage to keep up with golf equipment technology.

In the near future the club will undertake the re-grassing of all fairways and some irrigation updates.

Currently Hacienda is irrigated by a Toro Site Pro network 8000 computerised system. The water source is city or potable water with excellent pressure and is delivered to the golf course, so there is no need to store the water or have pumping stations.

**Challenging issues**

Rafael says his members have high expectations, as many of them are low handicap golfers.

Grasses are currently under the microscope. A bent A4 is sused on the greens, hybrid Bermuda 419 on the tees and the rough is a combination of cool season and warm season grasses. Fairways are common Bermuda and these will be overseeded in the fall of 2008 with perennial ryegrass.

"We are also looking at fescues to maintain very natural areas. Ones that require little or no maintenance because of the type of grass cultivars they are.

"Members here are very happy with change as long as we are doing things for the right reasons, either to conserve water or create a natural habitat for wildlife. Schemes that will help to protect the environment," said Rafael.



Rafael Barajas at Royal Birkdale