

A Yankee in Yorkshire: Working the 2003 Walker Cup

Editor's Note: This is Jon Jennings' account of his September 2003 trip to Yorkshire, England, to gain some insight and experience working on the grounds crew during the 2003 Walker Cup matches at Ganton Golf Club. The Walker Cup event, which pits Great Britain and Ireland versus the U.S., comes to Chicago Golf in 2005.

Following a nerve-wracking drive on the M1 expressway from Rugby to Leeds, I directed the car north on the A61 then east on A64 to the sleepy seaside village of Scarborough. I was almost accustomed to driving on the left side of the road by the time I arrived at the hotel in the late afternoon. Even the roundabouts had become less disturbing to me as the day progressed.

Earlier in the day, I had approached my hired car, a sporty silver Rover, five-speed diesel, and instinctively went for the right-side door. Thankfully I caught myself before I did, and walked around to the driver's side. Reviewing maps, starting the engine and slipping the car's transmission into neutral (with my left hand), I was absolutely terrified at the thought of driving a vehicle on the left side of the road. Driving a car is almost second nature when you have been doing it for 24 years. Now, every move required thought and there was no margin for error. The most important concept to remember is "look right."

This holds true when stepping off the curb, leaving a stop sign or light, and most important, when entering a roundabout, which as it turns out are at just about every junction.

On major roads, you are required to stay in the left lane unless passing. I found the flow of traffic driving from the congested suburb north of London to be moving around 80 miles an hour. On narrower two-lane roads, the challenge was judging the size of the car and not drifting left off the road to avoid oncoming traffic.

The opening ceremony for the 2003 Walker Cup matches was scheduled for that evening. Two thousand-plus enthusiastic spectators braved a chilly North Yorkshire evening, as the delightfully understated clubhouse provided an ideal stage for presentation of officials, captains and teams. The club's captain, Roger Booth, proudly welcomed all to Ganton. The ceremony was punctuated by a flyover from the British Air Force.

As the gathering broke up, I had yet to make my contact with the head greenkeeper, Phil Baldock. Instinctively, I traveled off the 18th fairway down a gravel path that led to a group of small buildings that looked as though they might be related to greenkeeping. A small red pickup truck with its engine running idled outside. All of the doors were locked with the exception of one sliding door leading into the main portion of the building. I peered inside and was met by a man on his way out carrying a cup cutter. I introduced myself and asked if he knew where I could find Phil Baldock. His reply, "That is me."



Phil Baldock (far right) is the head greenkeeper at Ganton Golf Club, site of the 2003 Walker Cup matches. His normal staff of seven swelled to 11 during the tournament.

(continued on page 28)

I had e-mailed Phil a few months earlier to inquire about the possibility of assisting his staff during the Walker Cup. He replied that he would be more than happy to find something for me to do. The weather in England and throughout Europe in 2003 was exceptionally dry and unseasonably warm. The normally lush heather was brown and the ground, unbelievably firm. Perfect for match-play conditions. Phil indicated that he was preparing to go out on the course and set hole locations for tomorrow's matches. I was to report for work in the shack at half-five in the morning.

Saturday morning, I was still delirious from jet lag when my alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. Not wanting to wake the member of our Club with whom I was sharing a room, I prepared to leave for the day in the dark. As I walked by the front desk, I was greeted by an odd look and a comment of "early start today, mate?" I replied in the affirmative and was on my way. The drive in the dark, on the wrong side of the road, seemed to take forever. Lighting was sparse outside the village and landmarks were scarce. A fog had crept into the lowlands overnight adding to the cloak of darkness. I arrived at the course and walked into the shack to meet the others on the staff.

Phil has been the head greenkeeper at Ganton for a number of years. Prior to that, he had been the head greenkeeper at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland. The position at Ganton became available when the former greenkeeper was killed in a shotgun accident one evening while attempting to control the wild hares that are rampant in this part of the country.

Over the next half-hour, individuals filtered into the crew room. The normal maintenance staff at Ganton consists of seven people. For the tournament, a small contingent of volunteers had swelled the staff to 11. Morning preparation entailed double-cutting greens, mowing tees and aprons as well as raking all of the bunkers. Double-cutting greens was carried out by one person on a triplex mower and two people with walk mowers. The triplex mowed all 19 greens and the walk mowers followed for a second cut. Two individuals

with pedestrian mowers cut all of the tees. The remaining five of us split up to rake bunkers.



The bunker-raking squad.

Bunkers in England represent the truest definition of a hazard. Sand combined with sea shells and gravel meet steep, often vertical sod walls that wish to retain any golf balls that enter for what may seem an eternity for players unfortunate enough to arrive there. The playing base is very firm.



British bunkers are truly punitive.

Each day of the tournament, I was paired up with a gentleman named Bob. Bob is an exceptionally friendly chap of 70 who moves with the spryness and agility of a man half his age. His previous career was in wildlife control for the government; now, he worked at the golf course part-time to assist his pension. Everyone walked as they left the shack, tools in hand, prepared for their morning tasks. I consider myself in fairly good condition, but Bob put me to shame with the quickness of his raking skills and fast-paced walk to the next bunker. Bob has never ventured to the States and asked many questions regarding the differences in maintenance practices between the two countries. Whilst traversing from hole to hole, one of the best tips Bob offered me was to avoid brushing up against the gorse.



Jon's partner in grooming bunkers, the energetic septuagenarian Bob.

Gorse is devilish, dense and spiny, a dull grayish-green shrub that typically grows to about 3 meters in height. It has small leaves that are generally shorter than its conspicuous spines. From early spring, yellow pea-like flowers develop in clusters on the ends of its branches, becoming hairy black seed pods by late summer.

The morning light broke through the fog. In the distance, we sighted what appeared to be a small kangaroo. Bob informed me that it was a hare. Hares wreak havoc on bunker faces, burrowing into the banks during the evening. It is common for the staff to patrol the course at night with trucks, lights and guns in order to reduce the population. There is in fact metal mesh netting surrounding the golf course in an attempt to limit the amount of hares that enter.



Hares are a big problem as they burrow into bunker faces by night. Population reduction via firearms is one remedy.

As we neared the end of our morning work, the first group of the day was teeing off. When we had completed the set-up tasks, we convened back at the shack. We discussed the plan of attack for the afternoon matches. The triplex and the two

pedestrian mowers would cut ahead of the groups in order to maintain speed on the green surfaces.



The 2003 U.S. Walker Cup team takes putting practice.

Before 2003, only two golf clubs in the world had held the Curtis Cup, the Walker Cup and the Ryder Cup: Royal Birkdale and Muirfield. Ganton, in the heart of Yorkshire, was now the third. The course of 6,894 yards, par 71, is a stunning example of an inland links in a gently contoured heath-land environment. This culmination of an evolutionary design process involving the likes of Harry Colt, Alister MacKenzie, Herbert Fowler and C.K. Cotton provides formidable bunkering and firm undulating greens that become treacherous as the day wears on.

Morning tasks completed and afternoon tasks allocated, the entire greenkeeping staff (all 11 of us) walked to the clubhouse, entering through the back kitchen door, and sat around a couple of tables pushed together in the manager's office. This is where we would eat breakfast every day during the tournament. The busy clubhouse staff was dotting upon players, members and other dignitaries. In between, they managed to deliver plates of hot food to us for the morning meal. I could identify most of the items displayed and politely took portions of one item I did not readily recognize. Scrambled eggs, steamed tomatoes, potatoes, cereal, fresh fruit, toast, some brown stuff and of course, tea.

The manager provided a small television for us to view the morning matches while we ate. Conversation ranged from sports to friendly crew banter. One of the staff asked me how I liked the black pudding (the aforementioned brown stuff). I tried a little; it had a unique taste, incompa-

rable to anything I had eaten prior in my life. The group began to chuckle and I was asked if I knew what I was consuming. At that point, common sense kicked in and told me that some things are better left unknown. (Black pudding, also known as blood pudding—this large link sausage is made of pig's blood, suet, bread crumbs and oatmeal. Almost black in color, blood sausage is generally sold pre-cooked. It's traditionally sautéed and served with mashed potatoes.)

Following breakfast, we returned to the shack. People were needed to walk with the afternoon matches and rake bunkers when a player exited the hazard. This was a great opportunity to view the matches inside the ropes each day. I grabbed a rake and rushed to the first tee with players, a Rules official from the Royal & Ancient, a standard-bearer and a sports commentator from the BBC piping information into the ear of golf analyst and voice of the BBC, Peter Allis.

The standard-bearers were young lads from Scarborough College and St. Peter's Independent School, often very witty and a lot of fun to travel the course with. The BBC person in our group was a woman named Frances. Frances had a deep passion for golf and was eager to discuss the matches. She would go back and forth between talking to me, listening to her earpiece and transmitting our match's highlights.

On the course, our entourage moved from tee to green with the players. I assisted Frances in keeping track of where a ball would end up after a precarious bounce and helped the standard-bearers set numbers in the scoring sign. Being able to stand with an unobstructed view on each tee was the best part of the job. The players would crush the ball, taking many of the design features out of play by hitting the ball beyond them. I actually walked 13 holes before having to rake a single bunker. Our match ended on 16 with Brock Mackenzie, U.S.A., defeating David Inglis, Scotland, 3 & 2.

Match play is a very fast-moving event in comparison to stroke play. If a player has an exceptionally poor hole, he will concede early and move to the next tee. Close matches become real pressure-cookers, with

(continued on page 31)

You take care of the course...

...we'll take care of the mosquitoes.

That's what we do. That's all we do.

Clarke's integrated pest management approach keeps nuisance mosquitoes off your course, and happy golfers coming back.

Call us today.

e-mail: georgebalis@clarkemosquito.com

1 800 942 2555

website: www.clarkemosquito.com

"Serving communities for over 50 years."



Clarke Environmental Mosquito Management, Inc.

159 Garden Avenue • Roselle, IL 60172

each player waiting for the other to stumble. A player who is particularly good with match-play mind games is Gary Wolstenholme.

Gary Wolstenholme is a primary reason the United States has not won the Walker Cup during the last three meetings. Wolstenholme is one of Britain's most celebrated amateurs, winning most recently the Amateur Championship for a second time at Royal Troon and the Scottish Open Stroke Play Championship at Turnberry. Wolstenholme was relishing the return to Ganton, the scene of his first Amateur Championship victory in 1991.

Maintenance prior to afternoon matches consisted of double-cutting greens. The one triplex and two pedestrian mowers would follow a gap behind the last group in the morning match to mow. Fairways had been mowed the Monday prior to the tournament's start. The dry summer that was continuing into the fall limited turf growth on the fairways. The grass was brown, in a state of dormancy, as fairway irrigation is

nonexistent at Ganton. Given that, skill and course management were essential to proper ball-positioning off the tee. An unexpected bounce could result in the loss of a hole.

The United States has not been successful in defeating the Great Britain and Ireland team since their meeting in 1997 at Quaker Ridge. Great Britain and Ireland slaughtered the U.S. again at Nairn in 1999 and beat them handily in 2001 at Ocean Forest. The 2003 Walker Cup at Ganton delivered another loss to the United States, although this time the margin shrank to one point. Hopefully, the United States will regain control of the Walker Cup in 2005 at Chicago Golf Club the way it did during the last match held there in 1928.

The opportunity to work with the staff in Britain was a very enriching experience. There, the game of golf is played in the manner that it was originally created. The ground is firm, the greens are fast; there is nothing lush or manicured about it. The penalties are fierce, and the player must swing and take his just punishment. Anyone hav-

Hopefully, the United States will regain control of the Walker Cup in 2005 at Chicago Golf Club the way it did during the last match held there in 1928.

ing even the slightest interest in the game should get exposure to conditions in the region where golf was created to understand how it should truly be played.



Wild Goose Chase™



We think our new name says it all — it's what we do! With **Wild Goose Chase™** you'll receive the same great service and integrated solutions you did when we were *Migratory Bird Management*. Call Sue Hagberg, *President*, at **708.448.8878**. Remember, if we don't answer our phone it's because we're on another Wild Goose Chase! You may also visit our web site at www.wildgoosechasers.net. Or, e-mail us at mbmgoose@covad.net.

Wild Goose Chase™
Time To Fly!



Simplot

PARTNERS™

Delivering Total Solutions



Programs Tailored to Fit What You Need

Contact Simplot Partners:

Tim Keating (630) 514-8997

Scot Spier (630) 546-0222

A. J. Huey (630) 514-8745

5300 Katrine Avenue, Downers Grove, IL 60515

Phone (630) 963-8787

www.simplotpartners.com

© 2002 J. R. Simplot Company. All rights reserved.