

CLOSER TIES

Carolinas superintendent forms relationships with a group of international greenkeepers

One of the best aspects of our industry is the free exchange of information and the relationships that are forged. I was able to experience both at their finest on a trip to England in January with nine other GCSAA members from throughout the country. Among them was esteemed Carolinas GCSA colleague, Bob Farren, CGCS, from Pinehurst. The group of 10 golf course superintendents had been assembled through the efforts of Bernhard and Co. as part of an exchange program between the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association and the GCSAA.

For the past seven years, 10 members of BIGGA have been sponsored by Bernhard and Co. to attend the Golf Industry Show to have a first-hand look at the golf industry in the United States. This year was the first time the program provided a trip to the United Kingdom for U.S. superintendents.



A sod-stack bunker at Ganton Golf Club, which hosted the 2000 Curtis Cup and the 2003 Walker Cup. Photo: Todd Pippin

By Todd Pippin

NOT MUCH RESEARCH

BIGGA's annual conference and show is hosted in northern England in the town of Harrogate, which is where our week-long trip began. We started with a short road trip to the Sports Turf Research Institute in Bingley. Unlike in the U.S., university turfgrass research in the U.K. is almost nonexistent. The primary functions of the STRI are to provide the facilities and staff the means to carry out this research and provide consulting services based on their findings. In many ways, the STRI provides services similar to those of the USGA Green Section, albeit on a much smaller scale.

We toured the 20 acres of plots and saw first hand some of the current research being investigated. Everything from varietal trials, slope stabilization and even the surface for a greyhound run. We could have easily spent the remainder of the day talking shop with the staff but a visit to an area club was set for the afternoon.

THE REAL DEAL

What a treat we had in store for us at Alwoodley Golf Club in Leeds. Alwoodley has the distinction of being the home club to the great Alister MacKenzie, Ph.D., who has crafted many classic courses all over the world. We met with club historian Nick Leefe, who provided us with some history of Alwoodley and MacKenzie's involvement with the club, as well as detailing the many design changes that have happened throughout the years.

With daylight running short, a walking tour of the course gave us our first look at golf in the U.K. Wow! What an eye-opening experience. There was nothing at all manufactured about it. There wasn't a huge industrial machine that had produced what was before us. This was the real deal. Simple, straightforward, unadulterated golf. The club's cart fleet consisted of a grand total of six trolleys (that's a golf cart for us Yanks), and if you couldn't walk and play a round in less than three hours, something was terribly wrong. It was obvious golfers on both sides of the pond might play by the same rules but certainly not the same game. With the sun setting on the course, we had our first day under our belts. What a great start.

TRADE SHOW TECH

The bulk of the week allowed us to attend the BIGGA Turf Management Exposition, which consisted of educational opportunities and a trade show. It was truly an international event, with the opening ceremonies hosting then-president of the GCSAA, Sean A. Hoolehan, CGCS, and then-president of the Canadian Golf Superintendents Association, Neil Blayney. Both presented the current state of affairs for their respective organizations, and both emphasized how critical it would be to strengthen our alliances on a global scale. This became a recurring theme for the week.

We all face similar problems worldwide. Rounds are down, waiting lists at clubs are a thing of the past, and it's becoming more difficult to attract qualified labor. There's also the looming threat of losing many pesticides, if not all of them. For example, Switzerland has implemented a complete ban of pesticides throughout the country. Only under eminent threat of a national public health crisis can they be used. With a population of just more than 60 million, less than 2 million play golf on some level annually in the United Kingdom, and this number is shrinking yearly. Anything sound familiar yet?

One informational tool that was launched at the BTME opening ceremonies was the World Turfgrass climate map developed by the Royal & Ancient (www.bestcourseforgolf.org). Currently, it's just a platform, only allowing users to view simple statistics and distribution of turf by region. However, after spending some time with it, one can see the map has endless possibilities as an information-sharing tool. I'm sure we won't see its full capability for several more years.

The trade show was surprisingly large, occupying four halls at the convention center. Almost every imaginable facet of the industry was represented except the big three. Textron, John Deere and Toro weren't present at the show. The major manufacturers follow an alternating annual conference schedule, and 2007 was an off year. Even so, more than 6,600 unique visitors passed through the convention center halls perusing the latest the industry has to offer.





The traveling team - Back (left to right): Mike Morris, CGCS; Robert Murtaugh, CGCS; Todd Pippin, Ken Williams, CGCS; Roger Stewart, CGCS; Bob Farren, CGCS; and Gregg Blew, CGCS. Front: Bob Becker, David Phipps and Dave Ward, CGCS. Photo: Bernhard and Co.

Midweek, we joined the previous 60 BIGGA delegates who enjoyed the exchange program and saw the next 10 named for the trip to Anaheim, Calif., this past February. A great group and organization hosted us for the evening, making us feel at home with a wonderful dinner to end Harrogate week for all the delegates.

The Alwoodley Golf Club in Leeds, England. It has the distinction of being the home club to Alister MacKenzie. Photo: Todd Pippin



A TRUE CLASSIC

Our final day was spent at Ganton Golf Club. Ganton hosted the great Harry Vardon as its head professional from 1896 to 1903, earning three of his six British Open titles, and the U.S. Open in 1900 during this tenure. I thought Alwoodly was impressive, but this was just phenomenal. Head greenkeeper Phillip K. D. Baldock hosted us for almost the whole day, walking the course and touring the clubhouse. Labeled as the finest inland links course in the country, it was easy to see that this was as good as golf gets. Like many classic courses, the professional has outgrown these links with the latest drivers and balls. You could still see, though, this was a real test for the rest of us mortals.

As host site for the 1949 Ryder Cup when Ben Hogan was on the winning team, the 2000 Curtis Cup and the 2003 Walker Cup, this track was made for the serious player. The member list comprises an elite and international flavor. The cost to join is a mere \$1,800, and everyone is assessed for operations at the end of the year. The wait list is endless. The club secretary told us they print a list in the monthly newsletter of those who have moved from the wait list to full member, members that have passed away and those on the wait list that have died before making it. I wasn't quite sure if I should chuckle or be humbled by the clout the club carries. So I did both.

SHARING RESOURCES

Having seen it first hand, all eyes truly do look to the West for the standards of conditioning. But are we missing out on how to make a golf course here in the U.S.? In our pursuit of excellence, have we bypassed the heart of the game and created something entirely different?

After the week there, I returned with more questions than answers. A return trip is definite. The friendships forged with the group I traveled with will last a lifetime, as well as those made while there.

It might not fit the schedule for an annual visit, but Harrogate week is a must for all to attend at least once during their careers. Our future relies on standing on a common ground, forging friendships and sharing our resources to follow the road to success. **GCI**

Todd Pippin is golf course superintendent at The Club at Longview in Weddington, N.C. He can be reached at 704-443-2535 or todd@pippin.com.