

# SCOTTISH GREENKEEPERS PRESERVE NATURAL CHALLENGE OF COURSES

by Stan Metsker

**Stan Metsker** made the trip to Scotland in September of 1977 to bring back ideas for the Country Club of Colorado where he is the Superintendent. For the last five years he has been working with architect Peter Dye, who designed and constructed the course, to develop some of the Scottish links atmosphere.



**Gorse at Gleneagle Golf Course.** The sharp-leaved gorse receives great respect from golfers and rarely gives back balls hit into it.

It is easy to see why Golf started in Scotland. The courses were there just waiting to be discovered. The dunes formed the contours, the grass was so starved that it was thin and easy to find a ball in, and the rabbits and sheep kept the grass down enough to form what later became mowed greens. Next to the sea (the links land) there are dunes of beachsand that provide so many possible natural golf holes that the biggest problem must have been in choosing which way to lay out the course to the fullest advantage.

The old rules of golf called for the teeing area to be within two clublengths of the previous hole. Even now, the next tee may be almost that close to the edge of the just completed green. This contributes to fast play in Scotland where everybody walks.

All the courses are not maintained alike nor do they look alike. The manufactured look of American courses can be found, but it is the exception. The maintenance of these courses is quite different from that in the U.S. Greenkeeper Norman Ferguson of Troon Golf Club uses the following methods:

- Fertilize with nitrogen only, once in spring and once in summer.
- Mow fairways once per week.
- Mow greens three times per week when growing well, twice when slower.
- Change cups once per week.
- For insects use DDT or Chlordane.
- After aerifying greens, topdress Turface into low spots and compost into high spots.
- Irrigate only enough to make the grass survive dry periods.

Like most other Greenkeepers in Scotland he has no triplex greens mowers, no power trap rake or trucksters. He does have some automatic irrigation of greens and, even more rare, some automatic irrigation on the fairways. As with other courses, one of his big continuous problems is rabbits. They are forever digging holes.

To understand the vegetation of a links course you must remember that the "soil" is almost pure dune sand and that the weather is that of an island (high humidity) on the same latitude with the Hudson Bay in Canada, Southern Alaska, and Southern Sweden. The climate is generally cool, windy and frequently rainy. But, there are occasional droughts.

These infertile, acid, and fast draining soil conditions call for some pretty tough plants. Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) is the most abundant and most respected bush. It is full of spine and is impossible to walk through. It blooms in the Spring and has pods that snap open on sunny fall days. It grows from a few in. to six ft. high and often is mixed with brambles such as blackberries. Gorse is often seen on the top of the dunes.

Heather (*Culluna*) grows in clumps very close to



**North Berwick 16th Green** (above) is formed by two plateaus which makes for some interesting putts. Worker (below) uses an alder broom to brush debris off a Gleneagle green.



the ground, usually less than six in. high. It blooms in late summer and early fall with the purple flowers making a living carpet. A golf ball can often be found in heather but the stroke to get it out is difficult due to the plant's wiry nature. It does well on hillsides.

Broom (*Cytisus*) is common but seems to be scattered as an individual plant among the more common gorse. It has almost no leaves, hence its name. It grows about three ft. high and has beautiful pea-like yellow flowers in the spring.

Roses are common but often they are the small creeping types and grow in with the grasses. Trees are almost non-existent. Occasionally there is a small maple or a wind swept hawthorn. Trees are not necessary to have a good golf course as is evident at the courses at St. Andrews Links.

Common Sea Buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) is not seen as often as gorse but on some courses makes large clumps of brush that are 15 ft. high and almost impenetrable. It has a nice gray-green color and spreads by suckers.

The grasses are mostly fine leaved fescues mixed with some bent and sometimes a little *Poa annua* where there is close mowing. The rough is generally thin and easy to find a ball in, even if the seed heads may be as high as six or eight inches. The fairways are also thin and often there is moss on the ground. Divots fill in very slowly, so it is a common practice to "sand" the divots. Seed is not usually included in the "sand" because dry winds often will kill the young seedlings. There was some evidence of overseeding on fairways.

Due to a prolonged dry period and the lack of a water system, some fairway grass had been lost

## Scotland



**English Hawthorn** tree (above) on St. Andrews Golf Course shows effects of high winds and blowing sand, characteristics of the links area of Scotland.

**Sod wall trap** (left) on St. Andrews keeps sand from eroding away.



during my visit. At St. Andrews where fairway aerifying had been done, the golfers were playing preferred lies. Greenkeeper Walter Wood explained to me that the Royal and Ancient Golf Club did not have much to say about this rule being used on the course because all four courses at St. Andrews are owned by the people of the City. Walter mentioned that he had a rather large sod nursery.

Sod is used in large quantities when traps are built or rebuilt. The sod wall faced trap is the rule, not the exception. With the soil being so sandy it is the only practical way to hold a steep bank. Many of the bunkers are small and are sunken below ground level to the point that hand raking is the only way to care for them. No rakes are left on the course for golfers to use.

Golf in Scotland is for everyone not just the rich. With about the same area as the State of Maine, Scotland boasts over 350 golf courses. Many are available to the residents for free or a small fee. It does not cost very much by U.S. standards to maintain a course there. While they are trying to maintain their courses as they have always been,

we in America are striving for a very high standard of excellence. The important difference of their not having motorized golf cars cannot be overlooked in regard to maintenance. Any golf course that must stand the wear and tear of golf cars must be watered and fertilized more in order to take it, however most of us are guilty of overmaintaining areas that are not in play.

Because Scotland is the home of golf, it would be good for any course superintendent to visit there to see the original golf courses from which our present day golf course has evolved.

**WTT**