



ISLAND OF GAMES AND GRASS



Great Britain's sports scene includes everything from bone-jarring rugby to afternoon lawn bowling with tea. The common thread? A love for natural grass playing surfaces

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Rivulets of perspiration stream down my back. Darn this blazing red wool sweater. Hot enough even without this coat.

Alternately jogging and walking in stiff wing-tips, the radiator boiling over in this surprising late-afternoon English sun, I realize he's going to get a kick out of this. This is picture-book stuff.

Can you believe it, a lady's tea party over a game of bowls (lawn bowling) in a public park bordering Nottingham University. The elderly women, hatted and bedecked in white finery, chatter like so many little birds on this warm fall afternoon. Ebony woods (oblong balls made of rockhard *lignum vitae*) litter the gutter-bounded court, a grass surface as smooth as a bridge table. Framing everything, tiers of manicured shrubbery.

"He" is Dr. Kent Kurtz, turfgrass professor at Cal-Poly University, my traveling partner, and, it's dawning on me, my friend. Days in the same hotel rooms, the same cramped overnight sleeper, the same tiny rent-a-car will do that.

It's that, or sharpened bunker rakes, toe to toe.

And "he," chin on chest, is propped in a chair in the back of a lecture hall. The speaker at the National Turfgrass Council creeps into informational overdrive. Kurtz snoozes.

Can't blame him really.

Nine days and dozens of faces rattled by like the clacking of that over-

English schoolboys after an afternoon soccer game in Yorkshire.



Fine turf like this is common in public parks near Nottingham University.

night rail spring in a sleeper London's King Crossing to Edinburgh. That's the way to run a railroad: midnight and on time, tee and cookies before turning in too. Chalk up another 1,100 miles of open road in a rented Renault.

We were part of the 35,000 to kick tires at the massive IOG Trade Show in Windsor before fingering turf at some of the finest lawn tennis facilities in London (and the world), and cruising cricket pitches on village greens.

With the sluggish Thames as a

backdrop, diplomat's families putter on the immaculate grass bowling and croquet courts at exclusive Hurlingham, a private club. Hurlingham and its grass impressed us.

In brooding Edinburgh, massive Murrayfield Stadium, home of Scottish rugby, sat silent in the rain (nothing's as empty as a stadium without a game). The groundsman here coaxes the grass tall and healthy.

We shivered in Glasgow's Ibrox Stadium as the hometown Rangers played listlessly in a game-long down-

pour and lost to visiting Dundee 2-0. This was soccer, world-class variety, and the grass was mowed shorter, the field surprisingly firm.

On this island, an island of gardens and games, the grass of a playing surface is important. Groundsmanship can be a respected life's work if not well paying. And universities teach groundsmanship; trade journals serve it. Both stress the technical in hand with the practical.

In Britain, where only two major stadiums sport synthetic turf, you don't just announce yourself as a groundsman.

Equidistant between Glasgow and London, in tiny Bingley, is The Sports Turf Research Institute, a 64-year-old institution with new headquarters. Here grass is pampered then literally reduced to fibers to determine the best possible playing surfaces. This facility with a staff of 45 sells its services to sport and golf. It's virtually self sufficient.

These impressions will last. And this final one of the tanned, young groundsman waiting to care for the court in that Nottingham park as the women's club concluded its afternoon bowl.

WT&T

PROTECTING A GREEN HERITAGE

London's exclusive Queens Club stays atop the international lawn tennis world with aggressive solutions to today's sports problems.

BANNED: American tennis whiz John McEnroe and a new-generation tennis shoe.

Neither are welcome at the Queens Club, an exclusive London tennis enclave. The reason? They're irritating—McEnroe to club members, the shoe to the grass playing surface.

Dawns the new hard-charging world of sport at this oasis of gentility—turfed tennis playground for London society. Aggressive play and modern equipment push the grounds manager and the grass here to their limits.

Groundskeeper Dave Kimpton shoves back.

"We banned them," says Kimpton of the new pimple-soled footwear. Initially worn by visiting pros for better traction and quicker starts, the new shoe caught on till finally 90 percent of the players on the club's famed grass courts were wearing them. The

grass—a mixture of perennial rye, creeping red and chewings fescue, bluegrass, and browntop—couldn't take it.

Blame also today's athlete.

"These people are super fit and they can run around for three or four hours," says Kimpton. "It's really a different game now. These people are more aggressive. The courts take a bashing."

Centennial year

Kimpton, intense as he is short, ranks as one of England's most respected (and better paid) groundsman. This marks the 100th year for his club which began as an ice rink and rifle range and, about 50 years ago, installed tennis courts. Old, well-maintained apartments circle the club with blocks of startlingly different architecture marking the fall of German bombs 43 years ago. Dave starts his

20th year here.

Tennis is this club's calling card. In addition to the turf courts, players have their choice of clay and synthetic surfaces. New indoor tennis and squash courts recently came into play also.

Things are happening at this square patch of green in the bustling, over-grown West Kensington area. The club is internationally known.

Financially hurting through the 1950s, the Queen's Club revived under the management of the Lawn Tennis Association, England's governing body of tennis. Along with this infusion of cash and renewed spirit rises new offices of the International Tennis Federation bringing 100 new faces.

While better-known Wimbledon numbers 375 members, the Queen's Club counts 4,000 with about half that number playing regularly. "This is a club that is used and used all the time," says Kimpton. Court time is booked eight days in advance.

But, like Wimbledon, the Queen's Club hosts a major tournament annually when spectator stands cover two of Kimpton's turf courts. Galleries of 15,000 crowd to watch top interna-



Dave Kipton, chief groundsman for London's Queens Club, with the lawn tennis courts he's cared for the past 20 years.

tional competitors, usually the week before Wimbledon.

Court tips

Here's how Kimpton prepares these turf courts:

- Each spring he scarifies, passing sharp blades over the courts five or six times. Spikes are criss-crossed an additional six or eight times, the final pass with one-inch spikes for overseeding.

- An application of chlordane kills the earthworms. Worm castings play havoc with a bouncing tennis ball.

- Fungicides are usually needed several times each summer. "I just tend to keep an eye on things," says Kimpton. "If I see something down there, I have to tweak it."

- Fertilizer in a light peat base is applied twice annually, in the spring and the fall. The fall feeding is heavier with phosphorus and potassium, the spring application with nitrogen.

- Sand topdressing at least twice each season helps smooth out the wrinkles.

- Soil pH is checked at least once every two seasons.

Kimpton's job is to maintain the health of the turf while providing the hardest, smoothest surface possible. Ransomes reel mowers keep the turf at $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch.

Says Kimpton, "it's getting to the stage where I'm beginning to need a head groundsman to do some of my work." And part of that reason, of course, is the attention his courts get from world caliber players.

Says Kimpton: "The professionals play here four or five weeks each year, and the wear they create is more se-

vere in that short period of time than the members the rest of the season."

And the banned McEnroe, a three-time champion at the Queen's Club?

It seems unpleasant words were spoken when he disputed court time on one of the all-weather courts.

"I guess it's bit snobbish," Kimpton says with a hint of a smile in his blue eyes.

—Ron Hall

SOUTER OF STIRLING

Scotsman John Souter's international reputation grows as the rescuer of sports playing surfaces. Providing proper drainage is his starting point.

John Souter, stonefaced in thought, sits in the gloom of Glasgow's Ibrox Stadium, in the director's box. The people to know fill these sheltered, midfield seats high above play. These are the people who gather at halftime in a cozy paneled room to trade pleasantries over coffee and tasty bite-sized pastries.

Souter earned his station in this group.

This 40ish Scot—always, it seems, dressed for business—makes a com-

fortable living giving his sport-loving countrymen with what they want. And what they want is grass that can take the pounding of cleated athletes during Scotland's damp North Sea winter. That's the season for rugby and soccer here, played in huge concrete stadiums brimming with rabid fans. Deep-seated rivalries lure busloads of excited spectators, dressed in club colors and chanting club songs, miles from home.

In contrast, the enigmatic Souter.

Business is business in his world, no shenanigans. His employees don't drink and drive. They, like Souter, dress well; they pick their words with care. And fun is fun. Souter's light-hearted presentation honoring Dr. Bill Daniel slid into a round of song at the Midwest Turf Conference last March. His wit, sharp but not unkind, is often aimed inward.

Rain falls

Today soaked Ibrox pulsates as the hometown Rangers match up with the visiting soccer team from Dundee. A weeklong rain that barely slackens prior to gametime has Souter, in a natty camel overcoat, his straight blonde hair pasted over a balding pate, surveying the shredded grass in the goal mouths.

Earlier this week this same Ibrox field drank in three inches of rain while the Rangers battled a Spanish team in what one local sports writer described "as the worst conditions I've seen in 25 years of covering the game." The scars of that contest, just three days later, are not evident.

That the game is played at all speaks well for the dogged inbred persistence of the turfgrass (mostly perennial ryegrass). And for Souter's work. Ibrox is just one of many fields installed or



John Souter, left, and Eddie Connaughton review drawings for a new Scottish golf course.

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ENGLAND



Soccer is big business in the UK. This Glasgow field, Ibrox Stadium, gets Souter's attention.

renovated by Souter since 1967.

Souter's reputation, fueled by an understanding of proper drainage, expands in spite of a tiny (by U.S. standards) support team of just five trusted field foremen. "Each of my boys can take care of a big job," says Souter. These men personally oversee maintenance on many of the of the 18 major fields in the UK which he has renovated.

Rows of sand

Drainage is the cornerstone, and one of the tools he uses is the so-called Morton Sand Slitter, devised by Irishman Alec Morton. This machine, looking like a pregnant cyclone spreader, lays 3,000 yards of sand slits (50mm wide, 100-300mm deep) daily. There are reportedly only two in the world, Morton's and Souter's.

The success of this sand-slitting technique is going international.

In 1984 Souter jetted to Malta in the sunny Mediterranean to rescue a four-year-old, clay mud pit known as the National Stadium at Ta'Qali, one stop on the prestigious FIFA (soccer's international ruling body) circuit. Just four years old, the Ta'Qali stadium had been described as "notorious" by writers.

Souter recommended working 1,600 tons of medium/fine sand (125-500 microns) four inches into the regraded and recrowned field. Periphery and lateral drains, as well as sideline manholes, were installed along with irrigation.

His maintenance program (the Malta grounds staff came to Scotland for training) includes spiking three times weekly plus frequent sand top dressing. Late in 1985 the field received additional sand slits. The success of this

work garnered Souter contracts for seven additional soccer pitches. Work began on four of these last fall.

Other directions

But while sports field renovation spotlights Souter's work, his firm, Souter of Stirling, grows in other directions including the design and renovation of golf courses, and the sale of turf machinery and products.

The newest member of his staff, Eddie Connaughton, an ambitious young Irishman with a Purdue University turfgrass background, took to the road as Souter's salesman this past summer. Ever-smiling Connaughton, a scratch golfer who played for Ireland before earning his Purdue letter jacket (which he still wears with some pride), works out of Souter's headquarters in a low-slung block building in Stirling, dominated—as many Scottish cities are—by a brooding castle. A staff of 20 works here about 40 minutes from Edinburgh.

Souter, however, professes little concern for getting bigger.

"I'm not looking to get much larger for the quality aspect of our work," he says. "After that I think you get into buck shifting."

Here on the outskirts of industrial Glasgow the young athletes, hair still damp from the showers, file out of now-silent Ibrox into the rain. No celebrations here, the hometown Rangers lost.

Souter is in the basement examining huge conduits which snake into and under the stadium's turfgrass surface and will keep it from freezing in the months ahead.

—Ron Hall