



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-