

## TURF MANAGEMENT IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND:

# So Similar, Yet So Different

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**T**HIS IS A STORY of travel. It begins in April, 1984, and takes us to Cambridge University, England, for Golf Course '84 — one of the first Great Britain - European international turfgrass conferences devoted to golf. I represented the USGA Green Section and traveled with a number of American golf course superintendents, builders, and owners.

Several days prior to and following the conference, our group played and visited some of the world's famous courses in England and Scotland. It is from these experiences the following notes were gathered. Perhaps from them a better understanding of the similarities of turf management problems on the two Atlantic shores may be possible. And strikingly so, the differences also become apparent!

### Common Problems Shared by U.S. and British Isle Courses

**A.** *Poa annua* (annual meadowgrass) is by far the biggest agronomic problem in Europe and the United Kingdom. It tends to burn out in the summer, becomes thatchy on greens, makes for slow, soft, and bumpy putting surfaces and tends to increase the disease susceptibility of turf, especially for thatch fungi.

**B.** Poor drainage on greens, tees, sand bunkers, and on fairways. It rains a lot in the U.K., and poor internal soil drainage and surface drainage problems (pockets that hold water) are of constant concern.

**C.** Compaction and shallow rooting are found on many golf courses in the British Isles receiving heavy play. According to a conservative estimate by Walter Woods, the superintendent, over 70,000 rounds are played each year over the Old Course at St. Andrews, Scotland. Much of this play is on rain-wet soils. Almost all compaction problems are the result of foot traffic — not golf cart traffic, as in this country. During my entire stay in Great Britain, I did not see one golf cart operating on any golf course.

Divots and divot repairs are also a problem and must be constantly attended to in order to maintain good turf density and quality.

**D.** Soil layering. As in this country, different soil layers are frequently present and impede the movement of water and roots. This can equate to poor rooting, poor soil drainage, weak turf, and eventually thatch and *Poa annua*.

**E.** Thatch. In comparison to golf turf in the United States, turf in the U.K. is closer cut, especially on fairways, and firmer. Excessive thatch under these conditions cannot be tolerated, and their management problems are geared to reduce, control, and avoid thatch. Interestingly, they rate *Poa annua* as their most thatchy turfgrass species.

**F.** Poor soil mixes in greens. The on-site versus off-site soil mixing controversy rages there as it has here. They have also found that on-site mixes,

although cheaper and easier, just aren't as satisfactory as off-site mixing. Off-site mixing is something the Green Section has advocated for years.

**G.** Irrigation. They seem plagued with problems associated with bad installation jobs, poor head spacing, poor water distribution and generally improperly functioning irrigation systems.

**H.** Summer dry spots. We call them isolated dry spots. The preferred treatment for both sides of the Atlantic is the same — aeration and wetting agents.

**I.** Tee size. It seems they share a common problem with many of our golf courses; tees are too small. Filling divot holes with soil and seed is a routine operation for greenkeepers in England and Scotland, because they walk their courses every day.

**J.** Poor quality fairway turf. Many fairways are uneven and clumpy because of too many different grass types,



(Above) A typical fairway; clumpy grass, weeds in flower but . . . closely mown and a good playing surface.

(Opposite page) Workers at St. Andrews "bricking" a sand bunker's face.

ranging from *Poa annua*, to perennial ryes, to the fescues and bentgrasses — all in the same landing zone. Fairways are closely clipped for play, and this practice partially compensates for the problem. Overall fairway quality, however, remains a primary area of concern.

**K.** Short tenure of office for green committeemen. By the time a committeeman becomes trained, a new committeeman comes into the job and the training program begins anew.

**L.** Low budgets. In comparison to many of our courses, the average club in the British Isles has an extremely low budget and finds it painfully difficult to raise membership dues. They seem to try to compensate for rising costs by taking in more outside parties or golfers on slow days.

As you see, turf managers in England, Scotland, and the United States share many common problems. However, there are still great differences in how the grass is managed and how the game is played.

#### The Differences We Have

**1.** Soil cultivation. The British and Europeans seem to rely most heavily on slitting (similar to subsoiling), solid tine aeration, and spiking. Hollow-tine aeration is not widely used. The deep

slitting is extremely disruptive to the putting surface. Membership complaints, however, seem not to be a problem there as much as they are here. They just play the course as they find it!

**2.** Pesticides. Except for problems with moss and a winter basidiomycete disease that sometimes occurs, chemical pesticide usage on the golf course seems almost non-existent. They do, however, employ specialists to trap and dispose of rabbits — by far their most serious outside problem. The four courses at St. Andrews employ a full-time rabbit catcher.

**3.** Fertility. Their average golf course seems to use much less fertilizer than our courses. Color does not seem to be as important.

**4.** Water. In the purest sense of the word, they keep their courses dry and hungry. They have found that liberal use of water and fertilizer only encourages *Poa annua*.

**5.** Course manicuring and overall turf quality. There is a vast difference between what the golfers there expect of course care and what the average American golfer has come to expect. Our courses are far more manicured than the ones I saw in Britain. They seem not to be concerned with consistency of quality or grass texture. It is part of their game

and a reflection of their golfer's skill to see and compensate for any differences. "Rub of the Green" is still very much in effect.

**6.** Maintenance costs and budgets. Their maintenance costs and budgets are a fraction of ours. Undoubtedly, their weather conditions and more "natural" golf courses just do not require as much man-made maintenance. Their critical golfers seem to be more philosophical. They tend to play the course as they find it and realize that their budgets are quite low (they want them that way). They realize they are getting what they are paying for.

**7.** Tougher designs and penalizing sand bunkers. Remember the old saying about golf course design: "Reward a good shot and penalize a bad one." If you keep the ball in play on a British course, you can score reasonably well. Stray off line and you will be penalized. Natural heather, gorse, Scotch broom, deep grassy rough, along with water and sand hazards, severely penalize anyone unfortunate enough to land there. Oftentimes it takes an outstanding shot to recover and get the ball back into play and not necessarily hit the green and hold it.

Their putting green contours are amazing. Greens and bunkering in the United States are characterless in comparison to the majority of the courses I saw. The majority of their golf courses are studies in golf architecture.

**8.** Tradition. How can one put into words the inner feeling you have walking down the fairways of St. Andrews, Carnoustie, Royal Birkdale; playing on soils and grasses that once supported Tom Morris, Bobby Jones, and Ben Hogan; playing courses where the British Open, British Amateur, and Walker Cup have been played time after time? This kind of history and tradition comes only with time. One can feel it, sense it, as he experiences golf on the great courses of England and Scotland.

#### In Conclusion

The journey was an experience in meeting new people, seeing new things, savoring new sights, sounds, and smells. There was great companionship and camaraderie. No better representatives of the United States turfgrass industry and golf community could have been found anywhere than those making this trip. It was a marvelous professional and personal experience.

