

# The Kiwis Have It Right!

*Golfers in New Zealand are being influenced by American maintenance standards viewed on television. Is it right or wrong?*

by LARRY GILHULY

**C**AN YOU IMAGINE a location on Earth where golf is played for the fun of it? Where it costs only a few dollars or less for 18 holes? Where fairway irrigation isn't found on most golf courses, hence the courses play fast and firm? Where greens are now mowed as low as the dust on a hardwood floor and where bentgrass still dominates the putting surfaces? Where annual budgets are well below \$100,000 and many courses are maintained by only one to three employees? It still exists in the wonderful land called New Zealand, but you'd better hurry before it all comes to an end!

## The American Influence

Turn on your TV any weekend and you will observe an agronomic delicatessen prepared for the greatest men, women, and senior players in the world. Weeks, months, and, in some cases, years of advance planning have peaked these golf courses for the players and television cameras. The unfortunate side-effect of TV golf has been the trickle-down desire of private, resort, and public players to have the same type of conditions on their course as seen at the latest Tour event. In America, the battle to educate golfers continues; however, the real tragedy is the influence TV golf is having on golfers away from our shores. With the introduction of Sky television into New Zealand, the over-green, over-watered, over-budgeted, and *expensive* game of American golf is starting to influence maintenance practices there.

## The New Zealand Influence

For a number of reasons, golf and its maintenance in New Zealand are conducted in a manner that is better for the game. Smiles abound despite the inevitable mishits, grumbling about course conditions is minimal when compared to the cacophony of com-

plaints registered at many U.S. courses, and many courses are mowed by sheep!

**1. Golf is affordable.** It is very common to pay \$250 per month or more to play golf in many parts of the U.S. This is after the invitation fee that can often range from \$5,000 to \$100,000. In New Zealand, \$250 NZ pays for the entire year! *That* is affordable golf!

**2. Green is not the dominant color on golf courses.** With the lack of irrigation systems for the fairways and roughs, native browntop dominates the golf course in most cases. The golf courses play fast and firm on sometimes-dormant bentgrass fairways, while *Poa annua* often does not have the opportunity to make a strong foothold compared to courses with the added expense of an irrigation system.

**3. The New Zealand Sports Turf Institute agronomists.** This group of highly trained turf consultants ranks as high as any group of agronomists in the world. Those responsible for the maintenance of golf courses, sports fields, and lawn bowling are very fortunate to have the services of these individuals at a very affordable cost.

**4. Reasonable putting green mowing heights.** This is another area where overseas TV is causing a negative change in New Zealand golfing circles. By maintaining slightly high mowing heights while striving for smooth, rather than fast, surfaces, the native browntop bents continue to thrive. Unfortunately, the desire for fast greens, as seen on Sky TV, is beginning to change green populations to higher percentages of annual bentgrass. The combination of green color and fast greens does not bode well for the future of golf in New Zealand if affordable golf remains the ultimate goal!

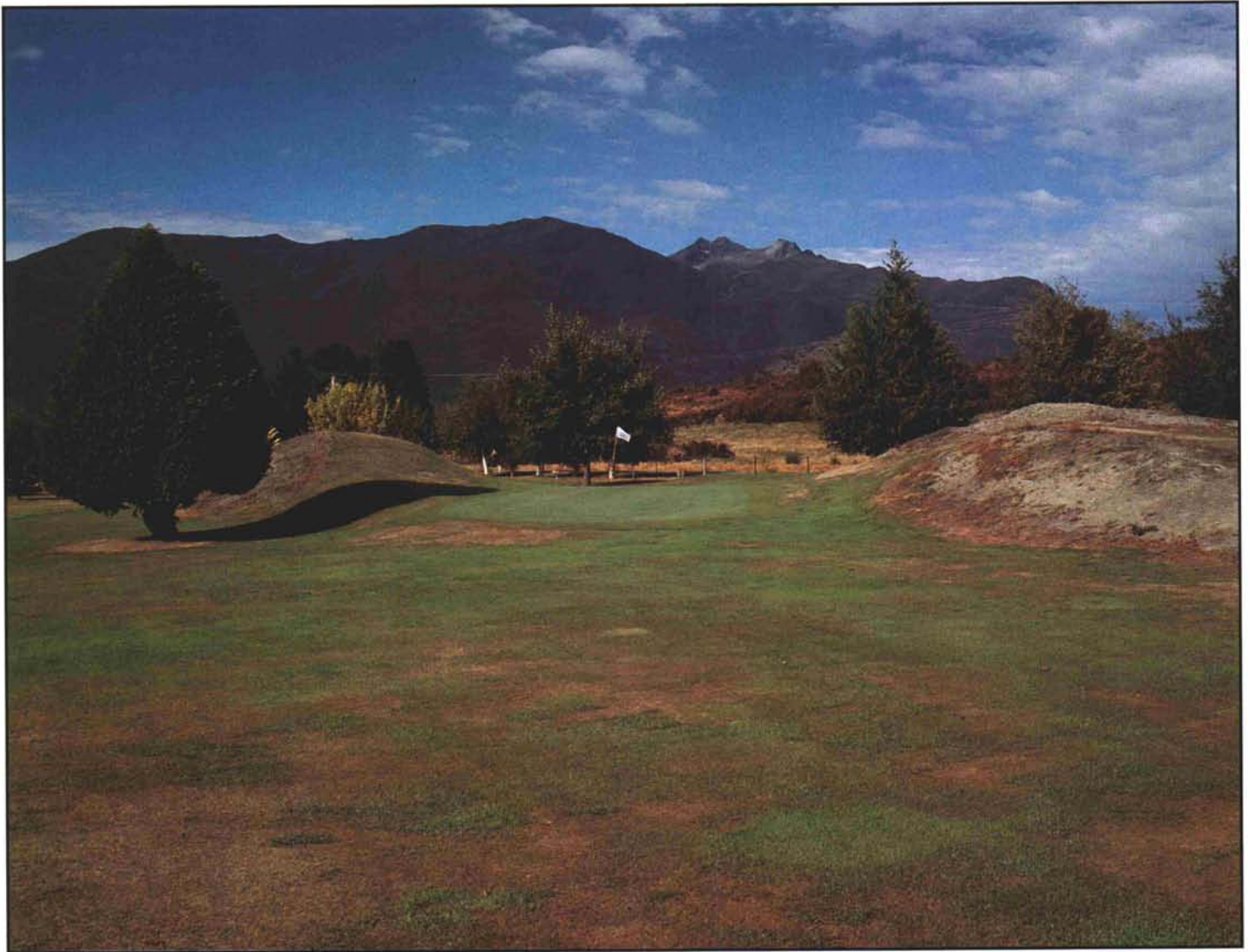
**5. Minimal chemical usage.** With the lack of fairway irrigation, slightly

higher putting green mowing heights, low cost of golf, a generally benign climate, and lower expectation levels by the players, golf in New Zealand does not require the chemical inputs that are common at high-budget courses in the United States. Chemicals are used; however, environmental issues currently are of no great concern. If the current trend toward the color green continues, the increased use of water and plant protectants will inevitably lead to environmental questions.

**6. Reduced fertilizer use.** As with the use of chemicals, fertilizers are used far less in New Zealand than in the U.S. By providing minimal inputs to turf growth, labor costs and mowing requirements can be controlled. Unfortunately, as the game becomes increasingly popular and green the color most desired, fertilizer usage and costs will escalate, thus moving New Zealand further from affordable golf.

**7. The lack of motorized power carts.** Let's face it. Power carts are here to stay in the U.S., but we should not be exporting the idea that golf is meant to be played while riding! Golf is meant for walking, and that is what New Zealand golf is all about. What a refreshing change to see virtually every player walking the course, carrying on a conversation between shots, and getting exercise at the same time. Also, the endless ribbons of gravel, asphalt, and concrete are certainly not missed!

**8. The lack of automatic irrigation systems.** The overall climate in New Zealand is very similar to the Pacific Northwest. Given the mild climate and the desire to make golf affordable, many golf courses in New Zealand do not possess automatic irrigation systems for the fairways and roughs. While some of the expandable clays can make playing conditions unacceptable, the alternate solution of automatic



*With natural features like these, who needs bunkers, water, or trees?*

irrigation will ultimately lead to the ruination of golf in New Zealand as it is played today! Bold words, indeed; however, consider the initial positive point about affordable golf. As soon as an automatic irrigation system is installed, the expectation levels of the players will rise accordingly. The superintendent will be put under great pressure to produce a green golf course, thereby leading to overwatering, overfertilizing, increased annual bluegrass, increased chemical usage, and a golf course that will play much longer than in “the good old days.” Costs will rise substantially, and affordable golf will cease to exist. Only those who resist the temptation of overusing the new irrigation system will have a chance to keep costs in line!

**9. Good playing conditions are provided with very little funding.** The golf course superintendents in New Zealand must be hard working, resourceful, and willing to put up with

more than their American counterparts. Staff sizes generally run from one to three, with five to six representing the extreme. Many courses have only two or three mowers for the entire 18 holes. Budgets are well under \$100,000 NZ (about \$70,000 U.S.). Salaries are low, and many superintendents are not even invited to the green committee meetings! Despite all of this, superintendents produce playing conditions that are quite good, and in some cases, superior to those found in the U.S. If the trend continues, the “bump and run” may become the “bump and splat”!

**10. Many courses are maintained by sheep.** Where else can you go where virtually every small town has golf at a rate that is affordable for all levels of income? By combing nature’s lawnmowers and allowing local rules to dictate preferred lies, golf in its truest form can be enjoyed without the high cost of mowers, fertilizer, chemicals,

and labor. While many of the sheep-grazed courses may not be mistaken for Augusta National, they do present exactly what golf is all about — camaraderie, challenge, and fun!

Is the grass always greener on the other side? It is if you are comparing the color of golf in America to New Zealand. But is this right? Should golf be played on immaculate fields of green that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, or is it meant to be more affordable and more rough around the edges? Every golf course must answer this question individually, but I, for one, believe the Kiwis have it right!

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