



# Cain and able

**He's the golf club's course manager and its PGA professional. And the club is located in Luxembourg. *Greenkeeping* meets the unique Leslie Cain**

**T**he Golf Club Grand Ducal is one of Luxembourg's greatest golfing venues. It has a strong sense of tradition and the course is set in wooded parkland with many trees over 100 years old and its classic design is typical of the 1930s. The tight tree-lined fairways reward the straight shot, putting a premium on placement.

*Greenkeeping* caught up with the club's course manager, Leslie Cain, to find out about what it is like to work at such a unique venue.

**Greenkeeping:** As a PGA pro, your path to greenkeeping was a little different to most. How did you learn, what made you cross over to greenkeeping and how long have you now been at the Golf Club Grand Ducal?

**Leslie Cain:** I became interested in greenkeeping when I was an assistant professional. I used to compare the playing

conditions of the courses I played and started to find out why some courses were in very good condition and some were not so good.

The cross-over came when I became professional at the Grand Ducal. The course was in bad shape and the club president knew I had a passion for greenkeeping and one day we were having a drink in the clubhouse and he told me the club were looking for a greenkeeper and he asked me would I be interested in taking on the job.

I have been at the club 19 years and for the last 15 years I have been greenkeeper and professional.

**Greenkeeping:** How do you currently split your time between the two job functions of PGA pro and course manager, and how do you find the two different job functions complement one another?

**Leslie Cain:** I work from 7am until 3pm as greenkeeper and after that I give my lessons. Saturday I teach full time and Sunday is my day off. The good part of doing the two roles is that I know what the golfers want from the course and I have good contact with the membership.

**Greenkeeping:** How big is your team, what are their names and how do you maximise the team resources to ensure best maintenance of the course?

**Leslie Cain:** Over the years my team has grown from six to eight full-time workers plus myself.

My assistant head is Frank Christ and I do not know what I would do without him. All members of the staff are trained to do all jobs, so when one is ill or on holiday they can replace each other. But each has their own

specific job depending on their preference and skill.

**Greenkeeping:** Over the last five years the course has been redesigned and renovated working with Mackenzie & Ebert. What were the reasons that drove the project?

**Leslie Cain:** As the club is more than 70 years old I felt that the course needed to be renovated and brought up to modern standards. The course's original architect was Tom Simpson and I knew that Tom Mackenzie was an admirer of him. So that is how Tom became involved with the project.

**Greenkeeping:** Exactly what work was undertaken to the tees and how much of an improvement have you seen?

**Leslie Cain:** Over the years the club had planted hundreds of trees, many too close to the tees and greens and over the years the trees have become quite big. The big problem with a lot of golf clubs is that they do not think about the problems when the trees become bigger. So we have had to cut a lot of trees. We are seeing big improvements since this has been done, but we still have a lot more to do.

**Greenkeeping:** The bunkers have been redesigned similar to those on the course in the mid 1930s. How do they look and how has it improved the course and play?



**Leslie Cain:** For me the new bunkers have made a big improvement to the course. The golfers have to think a lot more now. And as we do not have enough land to lengthen the course we have had to use the bunkering to strengthen the course.

**Greenkeeping:** A considerable amount of work was done to the greens across the

course, can you explain what work was done and how it's affected the playability of the course?

**Leslie Cain:** The greens have been drained and some extensions have been added. I tried to get the club to rebuild the greens but they did not want to do that. The extensions are built with 200mm root zone 80/20 and turfed with a fescue and bent mix grown on sand. This makes the maintenance quite difficult as you are working on two different greens' constructions at one time.

**Greenkeeping:** New drainage has been put in. What system have you installed, in which areas and what results have you seen? Do you have further drainage to put in?

**Leslie Cain:** The drainage system was designed by Tom and modified by the contractor, Marcus Terry. We used 100mm plastic pipe covered with pea shale and topped with the 80/20 mix.

We plan to band sand the green in the opposite direction to the drains next to help get the water to the drain faster in the original greens.

**Greenkeeping:** You've used Drill n Fill as part



## ► Greenkeeper profile

of the drainage solution, who have you used and what results have you seen. Do you have plans for further work?

**Leslie Cain:** I have used Drill n Fill in the past and we had good results. But I felt that to get the best out of it we needed to have drains, so now that we have them installed we will restart the Drill n Fill again.

We used Brett King from Ecosol Turfcare.

**Greenkeeping:** What seed cultivars do you generally use across the course, why do you use these and how often do you overseed?

**Leslie Cain:** We overseed on the greens two times a year. In my early days I tried fescue and bent mix but with the poor drainage and shade problems the fescues did not take, so I went with pure bent (browntop). But now we have improved the moisture problem we are back with the fescue and bent and are seeing more fescues.

**Greenkeeping:** What machine fleet are you



currently running? Are there any particular pieces that you have bought recently that you think are outstanding?

**Leslie Cain:** We do not use just one manufacturer, we have Toro, Deere and Jacobsen. I have just bought two new

machines and I am very pleased with them. One is the Baroness Fairway machine and my Infinitive hand mower by ATT. Both are well-made and simple in design.

**Greenkeeping:** You've been working to improve your soil biology over the last three years and have been working with Clive Pearson of XL Pro Bio. How did you come to meet Clive?

**Leslie Cain:** I was introduced to Clive by Frank Esslinger from Evergreen golf in Germany.

I had read and heard about compost tea and I thought it could be something for me. I am always trying to improve the biology of my soil. It is a lot of work to prepare the tea but I think it is worth all the effort, but its not a quick fix; it takes time and needs other products like seaweed and bio stimulants to make it all come together.

**Greenkeeping:** What products have you been using and where, and what tangible benefits

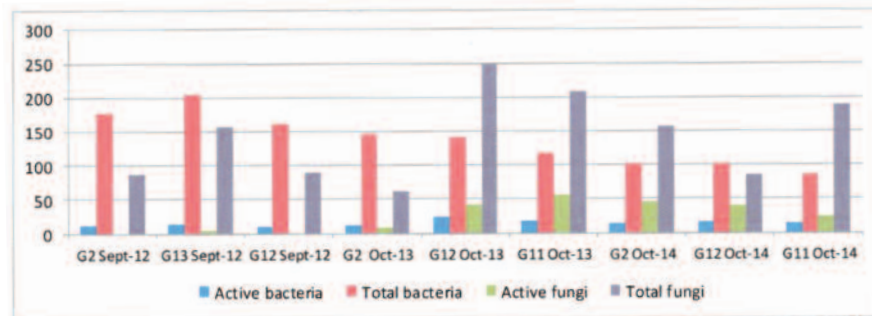


Diagram 3. Active and total bacteria and fungi comparison under the Grand Ducal greens between 2012 and 2014

have you seen since using XL Pro Bio?

**Leslie Cain:** We use Bio lift, BioStim and Compost Tee XL ProBio on the greens and for this year we will use them on tees. We have seen our soil biology improve, less use of fungicides and fertiliser.

**Greenkeeping:** You've been working with Philip Armitage of the European Turfgrass Specialists to monitor the results of the compost tea. How was this measured and

what are the recorded improvements you have seen over the three year period?

**Leslie Cain:** With Phil we have been doing nutrient and biology tests. And they are now really starting to show improvements. The nutrient and biology content in the soil under the greens is slowly becoming better and better and the maintenance strategy each year is producing better and more consistent results.

And I feel sure that the compost tea has had some influence on these results.

## ► Greenkeeper profile



**Greenkeeping:** Irrigation is a very expensive business in Luxembourg and it's an area you've had to be very commercial with. Can you explain the history behind the decisions, where and how you have saved money and what you are doing to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of irrigating the course moving forward?

**Leslie Cain:** Before I took over the club we were spending 100,000 euros on water per year. We now spend between 25 and 35,000 euros per year. We monitor the moisture level and adjust the irrigation to maintain a 15 to 25 percent moisture level.

**Greenkeeping:** What height of cut do you use across the course?

**Leslie Cain:** Greens 4mm (in winter 7mm). Tees 12mm. Fairways 14mm. Rough 35mm-plus. All members of staff work 40 hours per week plus overtime on the weekends.

**Greenkeeping:** Since you started at Grand Ducal you've been a real advocate for a continuous heavy aeration and top dressing programme. Please can you explain how this came to be and what programme you are running, when you aerate, why and what results you have seen?

**Leslie Cain:** The aeration programme was needed because there was a lot of compaction and thatch. The first thing I did was buy a Verti drain and mini tractor.

In the beginning we had lots of problems as there were very little roots and the grass would move a bit like a carpet. But within a few years we started to get some root growth. We use 12mm tines in spring and autumn and as much as the weather will let us. In summer we use 8mm pencil tines.

Followed by topdressing with pure 0.4 to 0.8 kiln dried sand. When I started we had zero sand in the top 200mm, now we have around a 100 to 120mm so we have come a long way but we still have lots to do.

**Greenkeeping:** The course has a heavy number of trees. What challenges do these present to the course and how do you manage this?

**Leslie Cain:** The trees are a major problem with roots and shade. In the autumn we have lots of leaves to collect. I have cut hundreds of trees over the years and will have to continue to cut for many more years.

**Greenkeeping:** With your experience, what advice would you give to youngsters starting out and wanting to pursue a career in the profession?

**Leslie Cain:** Make sure you are passionate about the job and then get yourself the best education you can afford.

Do not be afraid to go and ask some of the best greenkeepers around, as most are keen to help.

**Greenkeeping:** In your position and with your experience as a PGA pro and course manager, what changes do you think need to be made to benefit the industry sector and profession of the greenkeeper?

**Leslie Cain:** Clubs need to take more interest in educating staff and giving more respect to the greenkeeping industry. I see a lot of clubs that do not let the greenkeepers get on with the job that they are paid to do. And then they lose confidence in their own ability.

