

TALKING TURF TRIUMPH

The Talking Turf team members led by **Sue de Zwart** again excelled themselves in putting together what has become the premier conference for turf superintendents, and even managed to outdo themselves at the 2016 event.



MAIN: Sue de Zwart with Ken Mangum, who spent most of his career in charge of the famed Atlanta Athletic Club. **LEFT:** The conference was not all work and no play. Mark Kirkby (left) and Derek Muggeridge at the dinner held after a game drive in the Kruger Park.

It was 14 years ago that the first Talking Turf Superintendents' Conference was planned, and since then, the event has certainly become a highlight on the calendar for turf managers. The brainchild of Sue de Zwart and Steve Mangold, neither of these two well-known personalities in the turf industry could have envisaged just how successful the event would become.

For any conference to be successful, one requires the right venue, good attendance from the people that will best benefit, and speakers that are experts in their field. Sue de Zwart and her team showed that they have mastered the art of putting together a four-day conference that is unquestionably world class, and everyone came away from Malelane

having been entertained, educated and ready to return to their clubs with renewed vigor.

Avoiding the trap of trying to cram too much into too little time, the presentations were well-scheduled and kept the 70-odd delegates enthralled throughout. The four days began with a round of golf at Leopard Creek, always a treat, and it was then down to business.

Featuring the esteemed group of seven international speakers, a video introducing each was a tour deforce – a professional production that set the tone for the following days. Dr. Max Schlossberg, an associate professor of turfgrass nutrition at Pennsylvania State University, proved to be one of those rare lecturers that can hold an

audience's attention with a mixture of sharp wit and the ability to get a message across with being condescending. A recognised authority on soil science, statistical analysis of turf as well as turfgrass nutrition, Schlossberg was undoubtedly one of the stars of the show, and one would imagine that very few of his students ever miss his lectures at Penn State. Over the three days, the professor's talks on the selection and use of nitrogen fertilizers, optimising putting green soil fertility and pH and promoting deep turfgrass rooting were informative, memorable and entertaining.

Throughout the programme, the speakers managed to find the balance between "dumbing down" their material and blinding the audience with their

knowledge, and it would be unfair to single out specific presenters or topics that were particularly good.

Ken Mangum, who served the Atlanta Athletic Club for 26 years, delivered two excellent talks; one dealing with tournament preparation (as director of courses and grounds, Mangum was responsible for preparing his courses for many high-profile events such as the US Amateur and two PGA Championships), and the other explaining the rationale and project management of converting bentgrass greens to Ultra Dwarf. It will not be surprising to see more than a few South African golf clubs considering this conversion in future, so Mangum's talk was particularly pertinent.

Rod Burke, who is currently Syngenta's

marketing manager for Europe, Africa and the Middle East, has been with the company for 22 years, and has been involved with Research and Development and technical management. Burke's presentation on Turf Disease – Inside Out, using 3D photographic slides, was a rare opportunity to see into the world of microbiology with the use of 3D glasses.

Xavier Agusti, an agricultural engineer who has also earned a degree in economics, brought delegates up to date with Toro's irrigation technology, and his presentation on water management was also highly topical. Josep Cirera, an agronomist and turf manager for SemillasFito S.A. (the leading seed company in the Mediterranean region), delivered a presentation on new grass species and varieties for golf courses. Cirera is well-known as the author of the book *Turfgrass – A Technical Handbook*, which has become a much-valued reference tool for course superintendents.

Without describing every talk and the wealth of information that was shared over the four days, it must be said that the South African contributors were in no way overshadowed by their international colleagues.

The practical demonstrations held at the new Leopard Creek practice facility was an opportunity to see not only what the sponsors had to offer, but the facility itself, which is quite simply astounding in terms of its design, construction and quality of turf. Hosted by the man in charge, Derek Muggeridge, it was interesting to see the reaction of the delegates to what is simply the finest

facility outside of Augusta National. Comparing the colour, texture and playability of the T-1 and 007 greens, and to study the subtle differences between the Barbados, Hollywood, Riviera and Tiffsport Bermuda Grasses, could have kept the delegates debating for days, because it is very difficult to distinguish between great and exceptional.

Mention must be made of the well-researched and most interesting talk by Toro's Barry Becket, who wound up proceedings with an overview of the global golf industry. Becket has been with Toro for some 30 years, most of this time spent at the company's head office in Minneapolis. Currently responsible for marketing strategy for all golf equipment outside the US, Becket did not sugar-coat the state of the industry, but did manage

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to put a well-balanced spin on where the game might be going, and what the industry needs to do.

The sponsors, which included Smith Power Equipment, Toro, Toro Irrigation, Syngenta, Grundfos and Starke Ayres, must surely be well-pleased with the positive response shown by the delegates, and one hopes that they will continue to see value in these conferences. Most agreed that this is as good as it gets. ☺