

*For those who missed it in the April "Golf Monthly", we reprint this article here with grateful acknowledgments.*

## **Greenkeepers**

### **—A New Deal**

by A CORRESPONDENT

**G**OLF, like a fruit machine gone berserk, is currently pouring out the jackpot to anyone who bothers to pull the handle. Clubs, by virtue of mass patronage, enjoy the financial ramifications of full membership though suffering the minor encumbrance of fairway traffic problems. Club professionals, toiling from dawn till dusk on the uninitiated, and subsequently off-loading sets of clubs and trappings, have about them a full-bellied prosperous air. Their tournament counterparts face a season laden with spoils in the region of £80,000. The tragic irony of the whole gilt-edged merry-go-round is that the men who work the handle—who make the whole thing possible—are still waiting their turn for a ride; or rather, a fair deal from the golf boom which they so very largely help to sustain. They are the greenkeepers.

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The craft faces something more than the germ of a crisis. It is suffering from a sizeable leak which began as a slight seepage a few years back when a handful of disgruntled greenkeepers here and there drifted into industry. Latterly the flow has become more pronounced and the "situations vacant" columns of golf magazines have ominously thickened with requests for greenkeepers.

Recruitment to the craft turned out to be nothing more than a trickle. A census of members in the British Golf Greenkeepers Association, an institution which cannot boast of allegiance from every greenkeeper but nevertheless represents a cross-section, showed that half of them were the top side of middle age and a

considerable proportion of the remainder were somewhere near it. Greenkeeping had become a top-heavy craft in one respect with insufficient successors to carry on where the present generation leave off. The situation is steadily worsening and it does not require much imagination to foresee what damaging effect this state of affairs could have on British golf if it is allowed to develop unchecked.

There are multiple reasons for this critical state, not least of which is the greenkeepers' inability, or characteristic reluctance, to form themselves into a formidable national unit capable of extracting from golf's hierarchy and the Government a standard of wages and working conditions attractive enough to retain men of talent. Such an idea might not only seem anarchistic in concept but also totally unworkable for clubs who can ill-afford extra expense. However the threat of a meteoric rise in greenkeepers' wages may become inevitable as good men become scarce and in a position to accept the highest bidder.

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Greenkeeping is not officially recognised by the Ministry of Labour as a skilled trade in the fashion of carpentry, butchery, pattern-making and like crafts. The reason for this would seem in part that greenkeeping possesses no formal apprenticeship scheme. This means that an occupation which demands a working knowledge of botany, biology, meteorology, labour management, agricultural and mechanical engineering, basic farming and diplomacy (for use with ob-tuse Greens Committees) goes under the

vague official classification of "groundsman"—although a man in a Labour Exchange would know the difference.

When a greenkeeper talks terms with prospective employers he has to rely on a wage table set out by the National Association of Groundsmen whose economists could not have envisaged—and why should they?—the amount of special work that befalls a golf greenkeeper. The Association has recommended a 42-hour week with two weeks paid holiday after twelve months. It suggests time and a half for overtime and double time on Sundays. A groundsman's wage (with accommodation) should, it suggests, vary between £13 and £15 10s. according to his staff. Without accommodation he should expect between £14 10s. and £16 10s. a week. Junior assistants at the age of fifteen should receive £6 rising to £10 15s. at the age of 20.

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There can be no mistake about the cause of the greenkeeper drift. It has been the result of cold hard cash; or rather, the lack of it. A man can get more money for less hours and responsibility away from the golf course. The immediate remedy would be a general rise in the level of greenkeepers' wages so that they become viable—plus "perks"—with jobs outside the sport. But the greenkeepers at present are in no position to force such a solution on reluctant clubs and it is very doubtful whether they would have a mind to do so.

The other remedy is long-term and involves a certain amount of financial effort on the part of clubs; probably just as much as would be taken up by all-round increases for existing staffs. It does however provide a warranty for the future. It is in fact the introduction of an apprenticeship scheme which, among other benefits, would give to the craft official status from the Ministry of Labour departments. The timing of such a scheme could be perfect for it comes during a period when the post-war "bulge" of school children is on the threshold of job-hunting. It also coincides with the Government's decision to back any scheme devoted towards the

training of the young. Indeed the Government has declared its intention of taking powers to compel laggard employers to do more towards technical training for the young. A Ministry of Labour official says; "The time would now be right for a plan for apprentice greenkeepers to be accepted."

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Such a plan has in fact been formulated and already received approval in principle from the English Golf Union, the Welsh Golfing Union, and the Scottish Golf Union. Its architect is Mr. F. Hawtree whose father founded the Golf Greenkeepers Association some fifty years ago as "a medium for the exchange and development of knowledge and traditions in the practice of the craft." Mr. Hawtree adds the rider, "today a wider range of action is needed if that practice is to endure."

The scheme envisages a three-years' apprenticeship plus six months which a young entrant would serve initially in a probationary capacity. During this time he would learn basic green-keeping from a club while carrying out normal routine duties. He would also be released during the week to attend day classes at local centres—not as difficult as it would seem because the syllabus proposed falls closely into line with that of the horticultural scheme already in existence and taught at many technical institutes. He would also be released for a half-day each week to attend trade centres or other courses to study soil variations. In the final year, he would be allowed to attend an autumn or spring course at the Sports Turf Research Institute.

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Such a scheme would be surprisingly cheap to set in motion. The Sports Turf Research Institute has the background and tradition to play a major role and is reported to be willing to do so. Its experts are, for instance, prepared to set forth a syllabus in collaboration with interested golf parties. It might be pointed out that most golf parties likely to be interested already serve on the Board of Management of the Institute in the normal course of things. It is said to

be willing to take over the paper work attached to the scheme including the registration of apprentices.

A Joint Council, suggests Mr. Hawtree, would have to be established among golf organisations. This Council would have no jurisdiction over clubs with regard to payments of apprentices but could be called in to settle disputes. Its main concern would be general policy.

Although the apprenticeship idea has thus far been greeted with hallelujahs from the hierarchy, it is likely to meet with opposition at club level. The favourite objection will be that clubs would not be prepared to foot the bill for training (they would be responsible for an apprentice's travel and tuition); greenkeepers are too busy to give adequate training to others; and no club wants to spend four years' money on an apprentice who may very well leave them as soon as he qualifies.

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Mr. Hawtree says, "There is some truth in all these statements but it is not unreasonable to assume a proportion of golf clubs are willing to look beyond immediate advantage," although he does point out that even if wages are small "at least there may be hope of recruiting a few young men through the training which an organised apprenticeship gives." He stresses that his plan is only an outline although he has produced concrete examples of the way the scheme could fit in with existing technical institutes.

If there is one flaw in this otherwise admirable scheme it is that it slinks away from talking money. The Golf Greenkeepers Association goes no further than a timid plea that clubs make a "constant review." Mr. Hawtree is in the same camp but for different motives. He suggests, "to recommend a wage scale in conjunction with an apprenticeship scheme might well antagonise golf clubs and halt progress." Yet a greenkeeper of the type envisaged by the scheme will want more assurance of his financial future; at least viable recompense for his qualifications and talent. Perhaps if golf clubs had faced this fact some years ago the game would not now find itself on the brink of a crisis.



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