

NOW THINGS ARE SMOOTH

By PATRICK SMARTT

In an article under the title of "When the Going was Rough" I closed with some remarks hinting at a reactionary outlook.

In the care of courses there used to be two schools of thought: put nature back to nature, or the chemically minded. The first school, the diehards (of which I am one), are now but voices crying in the wilderness. One should never be didactic about anything in golf, whether it be the swing, course design or the nurturing thereof. It can however be educational to discuss the conflicting ideas.

In these days there is a tendency to over-emphasise the idea of making grass grow upwards. That remark is not so strange as it looks. As with trees, plants, vegetables, so with grass, it has to grow *downwards* first: roots. Let me give an example.

There was a heath and heather course set high on a hill, and so exposed to all the bedevilmments of our climate. It had been the custom to mow the greens very close. Dry spells in summer (there was no water laid on) resulted in brown, almost grassless surfaces—putting over which could produce a nervous breakdown.

A new broom has to proceed warily with established customs. After a while when the head greenkeeper had been struck down by illness and succeeded by his No. 2, grudging permission was extracted from the green committee to raise the mower blades. Then came a suggestion that shocked them deeply. It was that the grass roots did not go deep enough, and so the greens had not the bed from which to withstand any prolonged drought or heat. This was disbelieved. The precaution had been taken to remove a plug of turf with the hole-cutter. This was placed on the table for all to see. The roots were negligible.

The proposal was put forward that it was necessary to reverse the old saying to "What goes down must come up." To bring this about it was mooted that all forcing chemicals treatment ceased, except where a green was "sick," and old, seasoned beech leaf mould would be mixed with grass cuttings to form a compost heap. The committee reluctantly agreed to a year's trial, and headed for the bar to seek solace from having a maniac on their hands.

The beech leaf mould, heaven knows how many years old, was obtained from the great woods of a nearby estate. After a year of "nature back to nature," a plug was again exhibited and it was conceded there was a remarkable root growth with consequently healthy, weather-resistant greens. The proof of the pudding.

That was 15 years ago. The regime changed and back came the chemical dressings—they were necessary for the course had suffered from insufficient attention for some years. So let us look at that method in general, and not in particular to the course we have been discussing, which is in excellent condition.

My personal inclination against chemicals, except where a tonic is obviously needed, stems from several reasons. I have seen several instances of misapplication. Greens burned or disfigured by insufficiently diluted dressings. There are printed instructions supplied with the fertilisers, but this is putting the secretary or greenkeeper much in the same position as a qualified chemist making up a doctor's prescription. I have experienced the equivalent in the garden. My hobby is roses. Unable to get good manure any longer, I have to use packaged fertiliser—so

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many ounces to so much water to be applied to the square yard. This calls for care in preparation and then, even with the powder forms, a loose estimate of a square yard. I must say the roses have been co-operative.

Undulating greens present a special problem. A rainstorm will wash a powder dressing into the hollows, leaving the ridges (shaved anyway by the mowers) unfed. I think watering comes in here. No matter how light the spraying the hollows must benefit to the detriment of the rises. Further, it is unlikely that it is soft rain water. It will be argued that the ingredients of fertilisers are concocted, and this is acceptable, to feed the roots. Is it not easier for them to sink through the broken earth of a flower bed than the firm terrain on a golf course?

Another personal regret. The change wrought in the nature of courses. I belong to a generation which believed in tackling different conditions on different types of courses. Now we have fairways on heathland, and some links, that used to be found on park courses. Fairways that hold water are wormcast.

It has to be acknowledged, again in general terms, that with heavy machinery and the increased foot traffic (the explosion of golf) a good carpet of grass is desirable. The Old Course at St. Andrews for instance. And yet, there are times when one wonders if this reasoning is not as specious as

Winter Rules—allegedly invoked to save the course from being ravaged by divots—when everyone knows it is to give players better lies. How often is a crowded course to be seen from Mondays to Fridays, even when a visiting society is playing?

Members pay ever-increasing subscriptions, and are entitled to the conditions they wish. We have and shall continue to have lush fairways. When you consider the cost of machinery, the fuel for them, and the price of fertilisers, no wonder subscriptions go up.

It is no good sighing over days gone by, it is also as useless to fix the mind rigidly on the present. A glimpse forward leads to the conclusion that this desire for a strong growth of grass is going to settle the vexed question of the small or large ball. It will have to be the latter, for the same reason that the Americans use it. It sits up, instead of burying itself in a luxurious carpet.

Note: Shortly after completing this piece, I was much entertained by a discussion on T.V. arguing that fertilisers on farmland were slowly creating an arid desert. The farmers were all for putting muck on the land.

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