LOOKING AHEAD

Big shortage of good course managers

As more and more golf courses are being built in Britain and Europe Jim Arthur expresses his concern that many will suffer because of the shortage of good, well qualified managers

It is not only in golf greenkeeping that concern is being expressed about the effects of traffic on sports turf. One sees comments in the tennis world from such a respected head groundsman as Jim Thorn at the All England Club that management techniques have not kept abreast of the effects of stress and pressures from play and that unqualified, unskilled people are put in charge of court maintenance at many Clubs, merely because they had been club professionals. The same applies to cricket - where criticisms are made of wickets which not only have withstood all the world from such a respected head as more and more golf courses are being built in Britain and Europe Jim Arthur because they had been kept pace with the effect of extra traffic. Because...
to pay an extra £1 a week to enjoy more fully their own club's facilities! It defies belief.

So much for the problem - what of solutions? Obviously the first priority must be to see that GOOD men are proportionately rewarded - and provided with pensions and other perquisites but also to see that they are treated as skilled professional managers - if they are! Failure by their employers to regard school teachers as being a respected and worthwhile profession is far more behind their present discontent than mere salary levels.

Secondly we need better and more intensive education. Whilst there are VERY few colleges teaching good greenkeeping, we are in general training no more GOLF greenkeepers in a year, than we were a decade earlier. What is worse is that in many cases those already being trained in any way differently than 20 years ago - it is only the skill and devotion of a mere handful of dedicated college lecturers interpreting and re-thinking an outmoded and often totally wrong syllabus in order to meet today's problems, which prevents the whole education scheme being a fiasco. This is why it is so depressing for a meeting of college lecturers convened to discuss standardising, modernising or interpreting the City and Guilds syllabus to dismiss my pleas with the words "you are not going to do a Baker out us".

Seminars do not address themselves to current problems, the chief of which is the effect of traffic, but waste time and money inviting speakers from the other side of the Atlantic. Many of them have ideas which (however relevant they are, and this is sometimes debatable, to their own special conditions) are totally irrelevant not only to Northern European conditions but are (as one of the USGA Green Section's Agronomists told me when he stayed with me this year), equally irrelevant to most of the States also. We waste vast sums, not only in copying the mistakes made earlier, but in research, to PROVE wrong what we have known to be wrong for years.

PURE sand greens (not a 'sand soil' mix) designed to take the massive irrigation required under arid, very hot conditions and where extreme heat kills off any invading meadow grass have no relevance to our conditions. If these 'hydroponic' greens are not fed NPK they die and if they are, they degenerate at once to annual meadow grass.

There is insufficient "post graduate" training for skilled men - really only two satisfactory 5 day courses, once a year and always over-subscribed. The money is there as never before but there are too many debates about how it is to be used and too much dilution of resources. Frankly, greenkeeping education has by and large stagnated, since those optimistic days when we thought we could standardise courses and concentrate education at a few controllable centres.

The situation is I am assured no better in the States, where a far smaller proportion of clubs take advantage of the USGA Green Section's advisory service than do clubs here with S.T.R.I. Furthermore I am told that an even smaller proportion of U.S. superintendents are member of the GCSAA than the proportion in the U.K., who joined B.I.G.G.A. though their vast numbers at their annual jamborees makes this difficult to believe.

Respected golf writers such as Michael Williams and Donald Steel plead for better courses, better able to stand up to the vagaries of our weather (we do not have a climate!) and to produce not only first class conditions for major events but the same standards all the year round. Who is more important? A handful of talented and overpaid young men who care only that it is right on the day, or the all year round golfer, who should surely expect his course to be at the very least playable, whenever he wants to play it.

There are pleas for an end to the divisions that seem to beset the greenkeeping world, which are often less basic than it would appear. There are suggestions for a ruling authority to lay down standards for course management and presentation. Surely this is there already in the Royal and Ancient, working through its appointed body, the Golf Section of the Sports Turf Research Institute.

What we must eliminate are bad greenkeepers, and there are still many relying on fertilisers and water to tart up their courses, be this for a major Tournament or their own Captain's day - not understanding, or worse not caring, that this way lies thatch, annual meadow grass, temporary greens and course deterioration. I have no patience with those who say we have to learn to live with annual meadow grass - even though I accept that past bad greenkeeping has often left impossible legacy and control will necessarily be slow. So many of those who regard their awful meadow grass greens as inevitable have excellent bent approaches and fairways!

Finally, everyone from those in charge of clubs to those in charge of courses should note the avowed intention of the PGA to gain more control of the game. Whilst I rate many club professionals as my personal friends, there is no doubt that the interests of too many professionals in either group are opposed to those of members and players. This in no way implies that the interest of any club's professional in his Club's course should be discouraged, but he must not interfere with course management, any more than Greenkeepers should interfere with the way he runs HIS business. In far too many cases, malcontent members find their professional a willing focus for their grumbles - and once this happens, disaster and deterioration follow. Whilst undoubtedly the best way to run anything is through an amiable dictator there are two main problems - how to keep him amiable and how to stop him giving up - because it really is one of the most thankless tasks in the world to try to meet the opposed desires of the average membership - half of which are totally incompatible with the other.

The message is - especially to members 'controlled' clubs - to look after your good men, remembering that skilled staff are impossible to find and even bad ones are scarce.