

There's little or no comparison...

IT was once said that the biggest barrier to our understanding American politics is that we both speak (almost) the same language and, consequently, we expect the same rules and conditions to apply, and they do not!

I am in no way anti-American any more than I am anti-water or anti-fertiliser, but I treat all three with care and restraint as useful friends. What I am opposed to are those people who, on the basis of very slight experience, having played a handful of the top US courses, criticise British greenkeeping and eulogise about superior American methods.

They all seem to forget that those very courses they so admire and want us to emulate are staffed and equipped on a level that is nothing short of impossible here. Maximum feasible staffing levels in the UK are only ten per cent of American equivalents, US budgets for *annual maintenance* are far higher than the cost of building a new course here and the level of management is as intensive as it is expensive, on a wall-to-wall basis, the cost of which is beginning to tax even some of the richer US clubs.

Furthermore, our economic, as well as ecological conditions are wildly different—though, here again, there are probably even wider differences between New England and California or between the Canadian border and the Gulf of Mexico than between any parts of Europe.

Nor, by any means, are all the American courses as well maintained as the top tournament courses on which young professionals base their mindless criticism of our greenkeeping. They cannot see that they are comparing the effects of money as well as climate and we suffer weather here, not a predictable climate.

Anyone who has had to try to produce conditions in this abnormally dry, cold and late (if sunny) spring will agree that we cannot produce growth until the soil warms up and that without growth we cannot produce really good surfaces. Never was the folly of watering greens too soon better demonstrated than this spring—with severe frosts (and even

snow in the north) well into May and cold greens got colder.

I want to make it transparently clear that professionals criticising course conditions in the UK in relation to US courses merely reveal the shallowness of their critical faculties. You must compare like with like and I am sure there are a lot of American courses that are in a parlous state.

Of course, American greenkeeping has to be complex with so many different grass ecologies at the extremes of climatic and soil types, though you cannot help feeling that some of their all too real problems with pests and diseases (echoed, incidentally, in their agriculture) are exacerbated, if not caused, by a massive overkill with regular cocktails of herbicides and fungicides that must kill off good and bad alike.

I recently received a letter from Dr Jim Watson, vice-president of Toro US, thanking me for some papers on early research I had given him. He pointed out some interesting things—for example, in his experience, all grasses grow best at pH values of 6.5 to 7.2. They may do so in the States, but they certainly do not do so here. And, indeed, such alkaline conditions

By Jim Arthur

if linked to other than infertile soil states immediately encourage coarse grasses to suppress those very species that make our best courses.

He also feels that nutrients are more available at these levels. They may well be, but all our greenkeeping is based on the fact that the grasses that give us our best courses need very little of these self-same nutrients and it is their low level that prevents less desirable grasses from dominating fine turf.

Dr Watson added that thatch is very difficult to decompose at pH levels lower than 6.0. There are a few hundred greenkeepers in Britain who could disprove that statement if applied to this country. There are many more who have suffered from ill-advised liming, designed to raise pH levels to get rid of thatch (which it did not succeed in doing, but converted bent to annual meadow grass and encouraged worms, weeds and disease).

This all goes to prove that, while much is similar between our two countries, climate and golf club economics are wildly different and these more than anything else are our masters.

Dr Watson says that the USGA

ceased to support the acid theory in 1928 following the severe drought that killed off a lot of courses in the east when only those with alkaline greens survived. We tended to do the same thing after a similar disaster on some links in the droughts of the mid-thirties. This was, however, due to a combination of over-enthusiastic applications of ammonia and iron (up to eight times a year), coupled with inadequate irrigation.

I have previously quoted Dr C.M. Murray in South Africa in 1903 who claimed that to keep annual meadow grass out of pure bent greens we needed an acid soil with the only phosphates and potash in the form supplied with top dressing and not as fertilisers. This is still true now.

Today, the majority of courses, as I have evidence to show, use nitrogen only, balanced inorganic and organic in sensibly limited quantities with no phosphate as the standard greens fertiliser.

If no-one supports or practises the acid theory in America, then it should be realised that this applies only to America.

After the drought of 1976, which devastated so many annual meadow grass dominated courses fed heavily on complete fertilisers, many of these clubs—on my advice—have been fully restored by sensible, old fashioned greenkeeping. Neither are those greenkeepers who have been working for many, many years on the same lines likely to be let down by the weather, as has been suggested. The ban on phosphates has received more general acceptance and provided greater benefits than perhaps any other philosophy—in conjunction, of course, with regular aeration and sensibly restricted irrigation.

I have never claimed to have invented this technique. I was taught it nearly 40 years ago. It was old fashioned then, but it works.

Again, I have no wish to be seen as anti-American just for the sake of it, but it is easy for young tournament professionals to make judgements of courses specially prepared for 'their' week, which they never see at any other time.

The main problems of all greenkeepers are golfers and the traffic they cause and if we could keep them off our courses altogether, then they would always be in perfect condition. Nevertheless, we must keep our members on greens all the year round if humanly possible and softened up greens for a professional tournament lead to disasters and make for bad golf for the rest of the year.