

# GREENKEEPER

## TRAINING

At Golf Course 84 held at Cambridge this spring I stated my beliefs that the five major problems looming in course management over the next decade were not arguments about the relative merits of different management techniques but much more fundamental factors.

The most important of these is certainly the effects of ever increasing traffic, pedestrian as well as vehicular.

The second is the inefficient management system of so many golf clubs and the lack of continuity created by constantly changing Green Committees or varying management structures. It has often been said that the only recipe for success is to have an amiable dictator at the helm, but it is, of course, essential that he is pointed in the right direction.

Thirdly, we suffer from a plethora of conflicting advice, often based on totally unjustified deductions from very narrow research by blinkered soil physicists, who seem to have only just discovered or invented sand. Basic greenkeeping principles, as opposed to techniques, have not altered since greenkeeping began, if only because we all ought to be trying to encourage the fine turf forming grasses and not that ubiquitous weed, annual meadow grass.

Fourthly, we must combat the totally false standards and irrelevant advice based on American greenkeeping practice. Even this is gaining less favour in the States as clubs realise they can not afford the high costs of such artificially maintained standards. Not only are American problems diametrically different from ours, but even the ball game is different, let alone the budgets. I was asked in view of the change in attitude by some American clubs if I thought that there was scope for British advice in America. If so, perhaps there was scope for me and what would I do if I found myself charged with advising a major U.S course? My reply was to the point. I would get the hell out of there on the nearest aeroplane.



By Jim Arthur

The American influence leads to demands by misguided players of all standards and of commentators, who should know better, for colour and greenness whilst ignoring quality. Critical comments by one on the state of the Old Course for this year's superb Open Championship at St. Andrews reveal how wide is the gulf between the standards of those influenced by the American school with "lovely lush fairways" and holding target greens and those of us who struggle with varying degrees of success to retain the standards of golf, not, I might add, because we want to go back to "playing with crooks and pebbles to hacked-out holes" but to enable golfers to play to full greens for 365 days a year and to be able to control the ball, which is possible only from tight lies and not from lush meadows.

The fifth factor is by far the most important problem facing us in the next decade, namely technical greenkeeper education, which is at present fragmented, variable (and sometimes appallingly bad) and often irrelevant. To quote one item, during the early stages when training young men and dealing with plant structure, the

plant is always a bean or a geranium and never grass, yet it is grass structure about which they need to know.

Some seven years ago, after some preliminary field work, the Greenkeeper Training Committee was set up with the aim of establishing greenkeeper education to be eventually controlled in England and Wales by the British Golf Greenkeepers Association.

This scheme has, in the opinion of most critics, been an almost total failure, though there were a few honourable exceptions. The whole programme tottered to the edge of bankruptcy until a year ago when a new Chairman, Mr. A. S. Gardner, was appointed to rescue it.

The reasons for failure were debated at a conference which he chaired at the S.T.R.I. at Bingley in November, to which delegates from all the agricultural colleges offering greenkeeping courses — some 47 in all — were invited. Only 14 colleges sent delegates!

Of the 1300 greenkeepers registered under the scheme, no more than 300 (and this is possibly an over-estimate) qualified by passing City & Guilds Part II, and the rest are there by virtue of registering as existing head men or assistants. The list itself is in desperate need of being brought up to date. Not a very impressive output over seven years.

What is worse, is that we were told that although 47 colleges advertised greenkeeping courses (though some did not gain sufficient initial response to start them) only 19 colleges actually submitted students for examination. One college, boasting of special facilities, could produce a mere eight students for examination, and then only by calling in three other local colleges in the county.

This proliferation of courses was seen by some of us as partly due to an attempt by lecturers to justify their existence! Significantly, a very few colleges produced by far the majority of students for examination and these by common

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## Greenkeeper Training continued...

consent taught the best courses.

What is undeniable is that a number of courses ceased halfway through the syllabus, or perhaps never started, with the inevitable hardship of the minority of students prevented from furthering their education and qualifications. What is perhaps more arguable, is the content of the courses and frankly I have been horrified to discover what rubbish some students are taught under varying interpretations of the same City & Guilds syllabus.

There were some moments of unconscious humour, as when the Surrey delegate objected to the English being asked to follow the precedent of Scotland on how to educate students properly — not without its irony as half the greenkeepers in Surrey seem to be Scots!

Generally, however, there was ample evidence to prove the points which for years I have hammered home to little or no avail in England, namely that a City & Guilds horticulturally based and biased course bored the pants off first year students, with its seemingly total irrelevance to greenkeeping, so that many first year students left half way.

Too many courses resulted in the dilution of the quality of both lecturers and facilities. Similarly, day release for Part II anyway was difficult if not impossible because of the lack of facilities and lecturers. Block release must be the answer as I and many others have contended for the past decade. It is defeatist to say that clubs will not pay for young greenkeepers to attend residential courses, when, to quote one example, the cost of a three week residential course at Plumpton in Sussex for Phase II costs only £83.00 for under 18's and £96.00 for older students for the three weeks. This college opts for two blocks of three weeks in a year as an alternative to the more usual three blocks of a fortnight each. It is, of course, in the discussion at night rather than the lecturers themselves that the students gain so much.

Furthermore, the nationally acclaimed courses based at Elmwood College near St. Andrews, attract students from as far away as the Midlands and the South of

England. Significantly, the chairman of the Education Committee for those courses is a greenkeeper, to wit, Walter Woods, and the College staff sit as members.

It is clear too that colleges who have a vested interest in running efficient and well patronised courses, if they are not to lose staff, must drum up their trade by banging on the door of club secretaries, who claimed that they were not in the business of training staff at the club's expense, to see them move on elsewhere. They had, however, no answer to the question as to whether those committee men who complained were still in the employment of the firm who originally trained them!

One thing is certain, bad courses and bad interpretation of the City & Guilds syllabus must obviously go. Less obviously we should switch to a specialised greenkeeper syllabus from Phase I, based on a B. Tec syllabus, which is equivalent to Scotec. at Elmwood. Mixed classes of greenkeepers and groundsmen with the former in marked minorities were unhelpful. We have too little time to be able to waste any on irrelevant subjects.

The trainers themselves must be trained. Too many lecturers still need to go out on golf courses and learn greenkeeping from qualified head men, and too many training courses still refer to such heresies as "the ideal pH. figure", "the need for lime", "the value of granular fertilisers" and worse. At Windsor some of the demonstration plugs illustrating different grasses on one college stand were wrongly named!!!

Never let it be said that I am trying to use the Greenkeeper Training Schemes to further my ideas. To start with, they are not my ideas alone. For another, they are more and more universally recognised and, thirdly, Bingley and I are in complete agreement on basics, and basics are what it is all about.

It does not take a genius to deduce that the solution lies in taking Part II on a block release basis at a few centres, where the syllabus and the teaching methods can both be independently examined and controlled on a regular and systematic basis. Part I is difficult with so many entrants under the Manpower Services

Schemes, but even that is best, I feel, on a block release basis. We must change to a different basis. Scotland led the way with Scotec and is now changing again to modular training in Scotland which replaces it. Even their scheme is not immune to criticism — I was horrified to discover that 10% of one limited syllabus was devoted to tree and shrub planting — but they are willing to learn.

Above all else we must achieve a willingness to accept the need for better education at all levels. Employers must accept that they are likely to lose talented and ambitious youngsters, but where will they recruit the replacement for their present head man when he retires in a score of years if we have no well trained successors? Head men must accept that they must train their staff and none of this "I am not paid to do it, so why should I, when I then lose the chap and have to train the next?". Greenkeepers are, their own worst enemies. Too many are apathetic about training; do not attend meetings and regard their Association as a mere golfing society — particularly true in certain parts of the country.

Perhaps most important of all, golf clubs and golfers themselves must pay for the education of greenkeepers if they wish to enjoy playing their own courses under good conditions all year round.

Greenkeeping is at the crossroads. Ignorant but influential sections of the golfing public, aided and abetted by equally ignorant commentators, scream for green grass, lush fairways and holding greens. Only good greenkeepers can hold the fort.

Those greenkeepers who deride advisers, presumably because they think (rather than the advisers) that they know it all, do greenkeeping a disservice. They should remember that advisers are *complementary* to greenkeepers and not competitive and provide a totally different service. If these men, when applying for a post with a club who employ an adviser, stated in their interviews that they would not work with an adviser, then all would know where they stood. They wait, however, for a few years and then lay down an ultimatum. Many such die-hards are not born and bred greenkeepers and have neither the memory to go on of

## Greenkeeper Training continued

what good course condition is all about, prior to the disastrous two decades of over-watering and over-feeding, nor knowledge of the physics of the game which might make them more eloquent defenders of the old standards of fine, firm, fast, all-weather greens and tight lies, which is what essentially the game is all about. Worse still, they ruin lovely heathland and links courses left in their charge and eventually someone has to come and reverse it all.

Seminars are no alternative to formal training. All too often they merely provide a platform for the propagation of some nonsensical, come-today, gone-tomorrow ideas, leaving their listeners confused. I, for one, am addressing none this year and further hope that we shall see less trade-motivated meetings unless they are unashamedly designed to inform about the products or machines involved and not disguised as education.

Far better for such firms to straightforwardly entertain their customers rather than to pretend to be part of an education scheme.

## KENT BRANCH NEWS

An evening meeting was held at Chestfield Golf Club in September, the numbers attending were disappointing, however those absent were the losers.

Dr. Bryn Green from the University of London, who spoke at length on the ecology of golf courses in Kent.

A survey was carried out in 1983, of 20 of the 41 courses in the county. Dr. Green made full use of slides to explain the various management practices relevant to links, downland etc.

It became evident during the evening, that the ideas that Dr. Green put forward were not so different from those of many greenkeepers namely; infertility and working with nature & not against her. Many thanks to Dr. Green for a fascinating lecture.

Our Autumn golf meeting was held on the 4th October, at Canterbury Golf Club. 30 members & guests played a morning medal & afternoon stapleford over a course in fair condition considering the amount of rainfall in the preceding weeks.

Results were as follows:

### Morning

1st. Chris Lathem, 63 nett.  
2nd. Paul Joiner, 66 nett.  
3rd. Dick Knappett, 67 nett.  
all from Broome Park.  
Scratch. Mike Smith. 75 nett.  
Guest. Dave Erica. 70 nett.

### Afternoon

1st. George Brown, Broome Park, 34pts.  
2nd. Steve Suttle, Sene Valley, 33pts.  
3rd. W. Ellis.  
Trade. Geogg Yelland. (Rigby Taylor) 39pts.  
Guest. P. Summerfield, 36pts.

Thanks go to the Captain, Committee & Staff of Canterbury Golf Club for making our day so enjoyable. Thanks also to the following companies for donating prizes; Ransomes, Paice & Sons, T. Parker & Sons, Rigby Taylor and Patissons.

The spring meeting will be held at Rochester & Cobham Golf Club on the 9th May 1985.

On the 28th November 24 members visited the premises of Lely Imports at St. Neots where we received a guided tour of the warehouse, stores, workshops etc.

After an excellent lunch we boarded the coach for the short trip to Manns to see construction of the impressive TORO 350D. We toured the various departments, seeing each stage from chassis assembly to the finished article (less units which are still built in the U.S.A.).

Many thanks to Graham Dale of Lely and Ted and Dick Kingsland of Kingslands (Sandwich) Ltd. for their hospitality.

Among the events planned for 1985, are a visit to Royal St. Georges to see preparations for the forthcoming Open and Ransomes machinery 'clinic' organised by Paice & Sons.

Watch this space!

P. A. Wisbey Seasons Greetings to all members.

## The reclamation of indigenous turf—continued...

and men, it is fascinating to see that much of the book is concerned with the variety of weeds to be found. Even at the royal household, man does not even begin to defeat nature!

We, too, cannot beat nature—we must work with it and so, again, we are back to ecology. We intend to replace coarse grass or weed grass with fine grass. That means we intend to shift to a management that provides conditions to suit bents and fescues, not *Poa annua*. Whatever the golfer thinks he would like, he can't get away from that reality.

The middle way, or doing it gradually, probably will not work at all or the timescale would be far too

long. If you can get the worst over in two years, you have a chance. Spin it out maintaining poor conditions for much longer and everyone loses patience. Too many good greenkeepers and their chairmen have departed the scene for good trying that one. It certainly takes time for complete reclamation and a lot of it. Eventually the fine grass comes back. Many panic at that stage by trying to increase turf density too fast. Be patient. One day you suddenly realise that resilience has returned even in dry periods. We then have firm, fast greens. The principles of the past (which are unchanging) have been successfully combined with the

methods and machinery of today.

I will close with a quote from Donald Steel, who is not only a fine architect and expert golfer, but a veteran member of green committees and someone who actually understands greenkeeping. "If golf is not played on firm, fast greens, it is only half a game," he has said.

The restoration of this traditional British turf does not only make for better golf—it is the only way in our climate to produce economically and ecologically viable and manageable golf turf.

Next time, we will look at the reasoning behind the policies that work and how to prepare for action!