

'Presentation' has many meanings for many men

By Jim Arthur

THERE is a lot in common between presenting a golf course to its best advantage and writing an article! In both cases, we ought to carefully consider for whom the end product is designed. One fact is unarguable. Namely that, in this world, you cannot please everyone. In the days when we had chorus girls, there was always one fat girl at the end of the back row because, it was claimed, she represented someone's ideas of beauty!

As with courses, so with articles. The problems are numerous, not least (unless you are blessed with a very tolerant editor) the discipline of keeping within a stated number of words. Assuming (which may today be a rash assumption) that the author knows what he is talking about and able to present facts and ideas logically, as opposed to just filling the pages with pseudo-science or sales talk, the content is not difficult. What is, is having a clear idea of the type of readership one is aiming at.

I was more than a little taken aback at the SIGGA seminar at St Andrews last autumn when accused by our friends from the other side of the Atlantic of being so condescending to superintendents and so presumably to greenkeepers.

I had to explain that I had been attacking, as is my wont, not greenkeepers but management and not only the annually changing green committee - based on enthusiastic amateurs with too little time and less knowledge with which to implement their theories and subject to their ideas, in turn, being reversed the day they leave office - but commercial interests seeking to exploit new markets, careless of the fact that disaster inevitably follows the breaking of basic rules or that we have seen it all before. Yet not all commercial interests are harmful, so it is difficult to generalise without upsetting individual firms which are giving of their best.

My sympathies are always (well, nearly always) with the head greenkeeper and my articles are normally planned on that basis. Yet I have discovered one fact in life - as many have before me - and that is if you do anyone a favour, they resent it at heart and some of my bitterest critics among greenkeepers are the self same men whom I persuaded my clients to appoint in earlier years. In a year or so, those clubs were no longer my client! The incumbents knew it all and regarded it as a slur on their professional standing for any adviser to be consulted at all, rating them foolishly as competitors.

Forthright

Equally, I have been fairly forthright about the malign influence of the world of professional golf, concerned only with the tarding up of a course for a weeks tournament, with absolutely no concern for its condition the other fifty-one weeks of the year. Then - oops! - I realise that my many club professional friends of long standing may have been justifiably annoyed, but I certainly did not mean them! They have every interest in seeing that their courses are in perfect order every week of the year.

Similarly, I may have been scathing in the past about a minority of golf secretaries who want to be their own head greenkeeper - and presumably, club masters - and every other head office-holder in the club as well. Then I think of those knowledgeable, devoted dictators (not just secretaries) who have for years provided that all important element of continuity and realise that it is impossible to generalise without treading on sensitive toes.

I am reminded of just one such autocrat who for many years looked after 'his' course to perfection. He used to say to successive new

green committees each year, "Gentlemen, by the constitution of this club, we have to have a green committee. I would point out that we meet once a year for dinner, which you do not need to attend. Furthermore, there is nothing you can say or do that will influence the way I run the course and so long as it is in good order, that is the way it will be."

However, if I attempted to qualify even my more caustic comments, fewer still would get my meaning and I would never keep within the restraints on feature length!

I have always tried to avoid being misunderstood by attempting to be tactful or polite and, as a result, I am often described as irascible or abrasive! Words do seem to have entirely different meanings to some people than they do to me. As an example, 'fertilisation' is part of procreation and nothing to do with applying fertilisers!

It would be untrue to say that I welcome criticism (who does?), but I certainly welcome discussion and current proposals for me to discuss with agriculturally-based fertiliser companies, seeking to replace lost agricultural markets by going for illusory bonanzas in greenkeeping, are very welcome even if I am not too optimistic about converting them. What I do find annoying are attacks under pseudonyms. Moles live short and pugnacious lives and are notoriously unable to see daylight (but may be sensitive to vibrations) and, what is more, are likely to get their heads chopped off if they are rash enough to emerge on the surface.

Today, the in-word is presentation. I, in no way, sneer at that and, indeed, if we are concerned with how courses look as well as play, then this implies that there is less need now for concern about basic problems, such as thatchy greens or lush, wormy fairways.

To the uninitiated, presentation too often means pretty! I am

aghast at what some people admire (and not only on a golf course either!). Colour has never rated high with my generation – since we were brought up on natural fine wiry turf, which was rarely, if ever, lush or green, chiefly because no one could afford the money to make it so!

Nevertheless, I accept that younger generations want it green and it is possible, as any good greenkeeper knows, as well as perfectly permissible, to use a little window-dressing to produce a uniform green colour, but this can be achieved not with granular fertiliser applied by the ton, but by a few pounds (or should I say kilos!) of sulphate of iron or, in season, a *little* slow-release nitrogen.

Problem

One reason why fairy rings (and dry patches) seem to be more of a problem today is that, in the bad old days, heavy fertiliser usage masked them, but I would rather deal with the rings than put up with the annual meadow grass so induced. Let me make it clear that I have never advised “no fertilisers” on any course.

What appals me are illustrations of some American courses with greens surrounded by bedding plants giving a kaleidoscopic display to which I feel (I hope) that most people’s response would be ‘yuck’ or words to that effect! Yet, we see the start of such artificial presentation on this side of the Atlantic, with potted plants around greens and dyed water in ponds! Quite apart from the aesthetic angle, we simply cannot afford the bills.

Equally, I am not happy with many planting proposals on new, as well as existing, courses which involve planting flowering cherries or ornamental shrubs or even rhododendrons. Unless done on a grand scale, shrub planting looks pettifogging and pathetic. Perhaps I am biased, but I prefer natural conditions – heather and gorse especially. Admittedly, with some courses on flat clay land in urban areas, it would take a genius to make them look attractive but, even so, if such courses are well presented, then few will grumble and certainly no-one who matters – i.e. those who go to a golf club to play golf! Most good golfers’ minds are on the ball, not the pretty flowers!

To misquote – tidiness is next to godliness on a golf course. One of my first tasks in visiting a course for the first time has always been to look at the sheds – primarily, admittedly, to see what machines the club possesses, as this determines not only the methods of carrying out the work, but also indicates future needs for investment.

In addition, once I have seen the sheds, I have a good idea what to expect on the course. Scruffy, broken-down sheds; yards ankle deep in mud; machines clattered up with grass cuttings and dirt; broken bags of fertiliser (or even lime!) piled up in corners and drums of fungicides and herbicides stored in the ‘living’ accommodation are not necessarily the fault of the head-man, but certainly indicate a failure on the part of management generally to accept that a tidy shed means a tidy course – and an ordered mind.

Quite apart from the requirements of the Health and Safety at Work Act, which clubs may ignore at their peril, machines last longer if properly cleaned and maintained and men work more efficiently in bad weather if they know that they have a good dry (!) warm mess room and drying facilities to come back to.

One reason why I am so keen on weatherproof cabs for tractors is not solely an oversensitive concern for the comfort of staff, but because much greater productivity is achieved – especially with direct-mounted equipment – so that a wet day does not mean that all the staff are painting tee markers or huddling round the stove.

In passing, some head-men I know use such periods of really bad weather for greenkeeping training, as well as machinery overhaul, and are greatly to be encouraged for so doing.

Presentation is the secret of making a good impression. You may have produced superb fescue greens, but if the bunker faces are broken down, the walks between greens and tees eroded and bare and if tees are muddy devastated areas so uneven that a mountain goat would be hard pressed to find a level stance, then members will grumble and visitors will not return.

Presentation has many facets and is not all about tidiness. ‘Sculpting’ fairways by sym-

pathetic gang mowing to produce natural curves may be more time-consuming, but how much better they look!

I do not say that bunkers must always be manicured and trim as I like to see a natural shaggy appearance. But certainly bunkers must never be broken down, surrounded by muddy coarse open turf (often a result of intensive worm casting encouraged by the use of lime-rich sea sand on inland courses, perhaps many years earlier) and, above all, must not have overhanging lips nor raised leading edges, where the sand has been raked forward and the grass grows up to form a rim. This prevents the ball from being gathered into the sand floor and results in it finishing short in an unplayable lie in lush, unmown, long, shaggy grass.

Tees must be treated as neatly as possible within the restraints imposed by manpower, machines and money, as should be the greens. We want tees on which we can putt and I mean that literally.

The rough needs attention rather than treatment – except in so far as controlling invading grass in heather is concerned. Invasive seedlings of birch and pine must be culled and the open character of our heathland and moorland courses rigorously protected.

Expensive

Parkland courses demand quite expensive arboricultural treatment to conserve those relatively few magnificent specimens that replace bunkers – and the trees themselves need protection from those misguided enthusiasts who go round planting hundreds of trees, quite failing to visualise what they will look like in 50 years time, but which will inexorably destroy the character of the course, leaving it as ‘golf in a wood’, which is just as bad by my standards as ‘golf in a field’.

Presentation also implies intensified management – e.g. daily rather than three times a week mowing of tees as well as greens, mowing out broad surrounds and veritable foregreens, the preparation of graded rough – indeed, a lot more work.

Presentation also means attention to areas of the course not

Continued overleaf...

Jim Arthur – Continued...

strictly in play – e.g. paths, walk-off areas, even clubhouse surroundings, woodland management and thinning out, collection of dumps of grass mowings (such fruitful sources of disease and coarse grasses) and making sure machines, such as gang mowers or fairway aerators, are not left where they were last unhitched.

You will not believe this anecdote, but I assure you it is true! On a famous links course in Ireland, when the whistle blew for the morning break, on the dot the greenkeeper unhitched his gangs and left them mid-fairway to the fury of the members, not even bothering to tow them to one side before motoring off for his elevenses!

I know it is far fetched, but you can still learn from reducing arguments to absurdity! Neither head-man not indisciplined staff survived, I might add.

On so many courses, time has hallowed practices which to me are simply appalling, yet those

closest to the problem wonder why they never saw it until the problem and its implications were pointed out. One advantage of a system I have practised for decades – encouraging headmen to visit each others courses (from Open Championship venues downwards) – is that a fresh eye can often see what those most closely involved miss and the exchange is almost always helpful to both parties, especially when compliments are returned.

I cannot stress too much that what separates the superb courses from the also-rans is not only design, character or even management, but presentation and I will leave you with three quotations. Quality is never an accident, it is always the result of intelligent effort; genius is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration and presentation (or the equivalent army term) baffles brains!

**Subscribe to
Greenkeeper**

**Details from
Greenkeeper
121-123 High Street
Dovercourt
Harwich
Essex CO12 3AP
Tel: 0255 507526**



**Brian D. Pierson
(Contractors) Limited
For Hire Now**



**BRIAN PIERSON HAS ACQUIRED A SECOND
VERTI DRAIN**

PHONE: 0202 822372 NOW

OVER 100 SATISFIED CUSTOMERS