

The sorry state of British courses in winter

By Eddie Park

ANYONE who ponders on the present state of British golf courses eventually asks themselves two questions. Why was it allowed to happen? Why has there been no proper response to the deterioration?

A number of answers will almost certainly include the lack of continuity built into the system by which we run our golf clubs. But the most important reason is simply that there is no forum or centre where these matters can be reported and collated.

When you realise the very complicated - and costly - apparatus involved in running county and national unions (mainly to lay on competitions), it seems quite scandalous that none of these committees oversees the good health of our golf courses and those who maintain them.

Of course, nobody wants to discuss the problem courses in public and people appear to join golf clubs to improve their social status, so they may not want to admit, even to themselves, that their course is less than perfect.

Greenkeepers often tell me that they know their course has problems, but it is more than their job is worth to say so in public - even less to admit that it is the daft demands made on them by unthinking golfers that cause the problems.

The price of this conspiracy of silence is that the required financial resources are not made available. By contrast, serious medical diseases are 'notifiable' - i.e. the doctor has to notify the authorities which, thereby, always have a national picture before them. What if we had to notify the national golf unions when we have thatch on golf courses in excess of two inches? I bet the research training and cash for skilled men and machines would appear like magic.

In my limited way, I have made a personal survey. The first point to strike me is that most courses

pass muster for the four summer months - the problems arise in 'winter' which, increasingly, seems to include spring and autumn as well.

The second point is that upon returning to clubs I knew well thirty years ago, how few old faces are still there. Indeed, I suspect that the majority of those who now play golf all the year round have been members for less than ten years. Older club members certainly dislike the winter more, probably because winter golf on too many courses demands more strength than they possess. There's the root cause for the lack of continuity straight away!

I set myself to compare a large number of courses with their condition thirty years earlier. I opted for that landmark because in the 1950s I was a golfing fanatic and I still have diaries and scorecards to show where I played - green fees were cheap then and I covered a large area. I selected fifty clubs from widely differing regions and of widely different types - from the great international venue to the most humble suburban municipal. I returned to take a close look at them and then I went to consult the professional at my own club, David Snell.

David is a few years younger than me, but has been very active in club golf from 1948 and is still going strong. From 1956-73, he played the tournament circuit and won the *News of the World* British Matchplay title in 1959. In other words, he's a man who has played well on many courses for almost forty years.

When we compared notes, we agreed on some pretty dismal conclusions, chief of which is that there has been a profound deterioration in British golf courses during this period. This has been manifested primarily in the ever-reducing season for enjoyable golf.

We reckoned that very soft greens (usually thatched) are to

be found on at least thirty per cent of courses with virtual monocultures of *Poa annua* even more widespread. None of this would have been true thirty years ago.

Players today would be astonished (I was myself) to realise that up to the mid-1960s there was no rule allowing for a ball to be cleaned on the green. There was no need for one.

Probably the first recorded incident of the ill effects of over watering was at a tournament in Yorkshire during the 'sixties when Dave Thomas had a ball plugged in the green and used a sand-iron to play it.

Unknown

In those earlier days, cancellation of an event was unknown unless the course was covered in snow and the condition of a course was not a normal topic of conversation. We expected to play golf all year and to enjoy it.

The essence of the game was the skill to place the ball so that we could play our shots to the green via the approach areas. If we had to carry a bunker on to the green, which would be firm for some part of the year, we would risk incurring further penalty - not like today's game with brute strength and the totally airborne shot to a holding green.

David Snell remembers, as a young man, driving down the left hand side of the 16th at St Andrews. Henry Cotton was coming up the 3rd and called out: "You can't play that hole from this side young man," and so it proved.

At the Dunhill last autumn, when St Andrews was untypically heavily 'watered' by weeks of rain, the commentators were stressing that David's route was the way to play the 16th - not with St Andrews at its great and running best, I think.

Continued overleaf...

To pick out another example, during the 1983 Open at Royal Birkdale, which was criticised as being overwatered, it never stopped raining until five weeks before the championship and the pop-ups were not over-used. The weather had the last word!

One world-class professional told me that it was like playing to greens made of mushy peas. David Snell watched Tom Watson's crucial second shot in the last round from semi-rough on the left side to the plateau 16th green and recalled: "that shot would just not have been on in the old days."

Continuing our comparisons with the 'fifties, we agreed that many courses then had wet areas that might cause the course to be closed in heavy rain, but they were due to poor drainage, which has now been corrected in most cases.

Nowadays, we see closures or temporary greens because the greens - and only the greens - are too soft for foot traffic. We may also see winter greens that have not been 'blessed' by modern treatment with excellent swards.

The twin imported obsessions of target golf and presentation (appearance) seem to have caused the worst problems. I know there is more play and heavier machinery but, with skill, this can be remedied. Excessive fertiliser and water, causing complete changes in grass population, plus the effects of other chemicals on the microbiology, are much more damaging.

We have sought to produce totally artificial architecture and swards in a British climate and we have lost *that* game. But still the fertiliser, chemical and irrigation

companies advertise and sell their products, which are potentially harmful if misused, to layman committees with no expertise.

Clubs for which autumn, winter and spring golf are no longer attractive have turned indoors to keep up revenue with a vastly expanded social side that appeals strongly to many newcomers and their families.

The club professional is left out in the cold with sales for Christmas presents being his great event between September and May. It is not surprising that many of them have sought to enter club or course management. Mind you, in general terms it is the professionals who have encouraged the concept of target golf.

Many a club has planted trees to stop amateurs getting away with fluke shots, acting on the advice of their professional. If you want to see the real effect of trees on a golf course, walk out on a frosty morning and realise how frequently a course remains closed because greens are shaded from the sun.

You will not find a really good green on a course with tall trees. Of course, I understand the argument that trees are really 'bunkers in the sky', which committees can easily plant to make up for poor architecture, but they are also wreckers of fine turf and closers of courses that could safely be open.

As usual, the bottom line is a financial one. Not just social events, but special offers to sell golf days to visiting parties. Adverts, free meals - what next?

I have consistently argued for the past twenty years that efforts to defeat Old Mother Nature are

bound to fail. We did have quite a few cushy years, but '84, '85 and now the last cold winter have demonstrated, yet again, that the British pattern of climate will always reassert itself and throw in a few extremes as well.

There may be no disease, but temporary greens seem almost universal, even in dry weather. You don't need me to tell you who carries the can for this unsatisfactory situation. However unjust it may be, the golfer feels in his bones that it must be the greenkeeper who is responsible for the demonstrably poor product on which he plays. No one tells him otherwise. No one suggests that he is playing with the wrong ball and the wrong clubs, that he and his committees demand the wrong things and then try to achieve their demands by methods that are bound to fail. The end result is that the greenkeeper is denied the training, salary and status that otherwise might be his.

There are things the greenkeeper can do. By taking part in the conspiracy of silence I have described, he is stopping any progress. Greenkeepers' associations should not just exist for golf days and lectures from salesmen, etc. They should be grasping the need to get into public relations with spokesmen to tell the unions, the clubs and especially the golfers what is wrong and what is required.

Sixty years ago there was a disaster similar to that of today. Then, as now, there were some moves from the top and the Board of Greenkeeping Research was established. The efforts faded away and the disaster was forgotten.

Not again, I hope.

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