

ROAD WORKS AHEAD!

I MAKE no excuse for returning, yet again, to one of the major problems in course management today, namely traffic and associated wear. This is most obvious on the busiest courses, but every course shows more wear-related damage today than it did a decade ago.

My experience indicated that the most outstanding feature of course improvement in 1985 – which will be long remembered for its late spring and monsoon-like summer – related to fairways mown by hydraulic-powered, direct-mounted gang mowers and also where broad surrounds and very deep aprons – literally foregreens – were mown by triple mowers fitted with seven-bladed reels and floating heads and where cuttings were removed in boxes.

Quite apart from a dramatic improvement in playing conditions around the greens, this combination kept tractors well away from aprons, as well as putting surfaces, and especially narrow entrances to greens.

How often do you still see good greens and, often, excellent fairways with some five to ten yards of appallingly uneven, damaged, eroded, coarse-textured, open, muddy turf in the no-man's land between? One cause is simply because tractors, especially if towing trailed gangs, have to go over and over almost the same area of ground to mow awkward corners and what with constant traffic and tight turns and tyre marking, if not ruts, run-up conditions are unpredictable. I find that such areas are often the worst feature of many courses.

For too long in greenkeeping (farming learned the lesson decades earlier), we have treated tractors as horses. The design of some trailed gangs has not intrinsically altered since the days when they were fitted with shafts not draw-bars. In more than one greenkeeping shed, I have been shown the old leather boots used to prevent horses' hoof marks on

By Jim Arthur

fairway turf!

Harry Ferguson, who invented the hydraulic lift that revolutionised small farming, never claimed any great genius in the matter. He merely said that he was the first person to understand the difference between a horse and a tractor – namely that you cannot bolt anything to a horse's rump. Yet, we still tow equipment round our courses at the end of a tow bar, with about as much relative manoeuvrability as trying to turn a giant tanker in the English Channel.

By direct mounting, not only is there no need to go back over and over the same area, but you can back or run the machines under cover, as well as using the weight of the tractor, as with direct-mounted aerating machines, to achieve penetration instead of relying on sheer weight – with all its attendant problems in lifting and so wheel marking under soft conditions.

There never was a better summer to illustrate the benefits of hydraulic gang mowing than the last. On many hilly, but wet and heavy courses, the end result of trying to mow in the monsoon conditions that affected the whole of Britain, but nowhere worse than in Scotland and the north, was all too often a confused pattern of spiralling wheel slip and skid marks as greenkeepers desperately tried to stop tractors trailing gangs from stalling on slopes. Have you ever had to try to turn a set of trailed quintuple gangs around when the tractor gets stuck? Once bitten, twice shy!

Furthermore, with the lush growth and interrupted pattern to regular mowing, all too often with trailed gangs, fairways were left covered in unsightly lumps of cut grass accumulating on mowers and dropping off – even if the reels did not jam and land,

wheels consequently skid.

With hydraulic gangs, the higher reel speed, independent of the land speed, meant a better finish for three reasons. One, fairways could be cut more frequently, since it was simplicity itself, especially with weatherproof cabs, to mow fairways even in the pouring rain. Second, a finer finish was achieved with more cuts per yard, leaving no ribbing. Third, the high reel speed flung the finer cuttings further and so there was none of that unsightly 'silage crop' effect that so disfigured some inland fairways last summer.

More and more, we must try to divorce greenkeeper and golfer traffic, especially from vulnerable areas where both play and maintenance converge. Nowhere is this more serious, in both cause and effect, than at entrances to greens and walk-offs from green to tee.

I feel that architects should consider traffic more when designing courses – certainly in the case of potentially busy courses, especially those attached to hotels, to the extent of building 'orbital motorways' in the rough as part of the initial design concept. You can only deplore such extravagant and contrived bunkering around greens that forces all traffic into a narrow entrance. Inevitably, this becomes bare and eroded, while walk-off traffic is similarly constricted, with the same results.

Paths are really no answer. If they are in play, then problems are inevitable and, in any case, paths only transfer the problem to the end of the path. If paths must be made, they must be wide enough to take two players abreast, towing trolleys and with a surface kind to studded shoes. All too often, we see paths unused because they are hard underfoot to spikes. Yet, either side of the path, the turf is worn bare by players walking off.

Materials must also not damage mowers. I abhor chippings or

even red blaze and the best material I find is chopped brushings (a cheap source of supply on heathland courses, where only constant culling of seedling birch keeps this invasive weed at bay) or bark, which can be purchased. Shell (cockle shell used so widely on Lancashire links and in Essex), is satisfactory, except where the soil is acid, as it kills heather. With brushings, you need a chopper, such as the old turnip chopper of my farming youth. But there are efficient ones on the market, either pto driven or self-propelled.

Prevention is always better than cure, but at times we have to cure as well. Constant deep aeration of areas subjected to compaction will help, but there is no guarantee against erosion, by wheels or feet, as those in charge of famous beauty spots have discovered!

This is why better mowing and better preparation of wide surrounds, with its implication of constant aeration; regular mowing three times a week; even top dressing and certainly controlled, periodic, rather than permanent, irrigation helps such vulnerable

areas to survive the effects of traffic better.

Even so, patching – especially of paths from tees, as well as from greens to tees – is inevitable, often on an annual basis. Too often, imported turf – either seeded turf, which can never be hard-wearing enough initially (and it rarely gets a chance to survive long enough to become mature), or coarse meadow turf – is used. Contrary to opinions still being expressed, ryegrass does not form a hard-wearing turf because it is so open and easily invaded by annual meadow grass and it gives an unsightly finish.

Fairway turf

The answer – even if it is unpopular with the members – is to use well-established fairway turf. If the scars are patched at once with imported (or nursery) turf and, if necessary, protected by white lines or even rope and if the turf is lifted away from the main line of traffic, even the least satisfactory replacement turf will eventually establish and become very similar to that surrounding it.

This will happen, if only because the grass type will stabilise and is determined by two factors – natural (the soil below and the weather) and applied (management in the broadest sense).

Needless to say, never patch with ryegrass-contaminated imported turf. The correct solution may mean double work, but no more than patching the same walk-off area twice in one season and still not solving the problem.

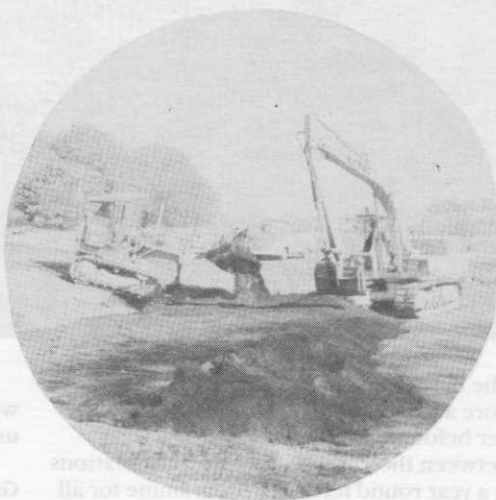
The problem of traffic is certainly not new. The great increase in winter play and, therefore, the greatest damage on more easily sealed wet soils, coupled with ever-increasing standards that are expected – indeed, demanded – in course presentation is. Much more repair and remedial work is, therefore, required and we can safely say that the problem of traffic and its results will get worse.

Even if every precaution, such as introducing white lines, banning trolleys in winter, making greenkeeper roadways and intensifying remedial work, is taken, we shall all be needing much larger and better managed turf nurseries in future years.

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