

TRAINING IS EVERY CLUB'S RESPONSIBILITY

By J.H. Arthur and P. Hayes

IF some new wonder product or machine were to be introduced, which could be proved beyond any doubt to even the most sceptical of Committees to improve the condition of a golf course and, at the same time, lower costs, often dramatically, it is reasonable to suppose that those promoting the invention would receive a warm welcome at every Golf Club in Britain. Yet, this product exists, has a record of success which is indisputable in every aspect of modern life and its benefits are accepted by all.

Its name is education.

There is no person whose influence for good or ill on any golf course is greater than that of the Head Greenkeeper. It is his day-to-day decisions which make or mar his course even if he is working to an agreed, general, long-term programme.

Today's Course Managers and Head men must be versed in every aspect of course management, from the latest cures to all the problems that beset the turf to assessment of new machinery and critical, but informed, views on the latest 'new ideas'.

Representatives

The Greenkeeper Training Committee consists of two representatives from each of the three Greenkeeper Associations (hopefully, soon to be united) with representatives from the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish Golfing Unions, a representative of the Secretaries' Association, and the authors of this article, with an Administrator and Treasurer. Its function is to improve the standards of greenkeeping education provided by existing agricultural and horticultural colleges and to encourage Golf Clubs to send their staff for training.

So far as the first part is concerned, it is obviously rational to concentrate resources on a few Centres of Excellence, which is

the proven way of improving performance. This makes it possible to eliminate that previously insoluble problem - the trainer who often knew less than his students, whilst at the same time guiding the content of the courses and ensuring a unanimity of interpretation of the agreed syllabi.

It is not so easy to achieve the second part of the Committee's brief - namely, to encourage Clubs to send their staff for training. Education, generally, in Scotland has traditionally always been more valued than in England, partly by tradition and partly perhaps (if this is not thought to be too cynical) because Scotland has always had to export its best brains and recognised that qualifications, whether in engineering or greenkeeping, are essential to successful applications.

Scottish greenkeeper education set the pattern for improvement, departing from the multiplicity of day-release courses taken by a college lecturer with often as little interest as knowledge of his subject, whose teachings to their young staff reduced the more knowledgeable Head men of many courses to apoplexy and necessitated them having to retrain their youngsters to exorcise the heresies of agricultural bias.

The problems do not lie in Scotland - and the problems in Ireland are largely those associated with relatively few, widely scattered Clubs, many with poor resources, and the high cost of travel and accommodation for unsubsidised, centralised greenkeeper education in Dublin.

Even in Wales, where the Welsh Golf Union deals directly with the Clubs, there is general enthusiasm and agreed support from many, if not the majority, for the centralised training scheme at two colleges serving North and South Wales.

The position with regard to English Clubs varies - but, in general, it is less than satisfactory and the reason appears most likely to be that the English Golf Union has no authority over individual Clubs and can only advise County organisations.

Sitting in on liaison committees at some, but by no means all, of the five colleges reveals all too clearly the extent of the problem. The sheer apathy of most of the County Unions who, with a few honourable and enthusiastic exceptions, fail to send a representative - even to a college situated in their County - beggars belief.

Spend money

One is greeted by comments to the effect that if Clubs spend money to train Greenkeepers, they will only lose them as they will go elsewhere for more money. Few accept the fact that most people do not finish their working life at the firm they started with! The (modest) cost of training creates visible shock waves - and when it is pointed out that, even at its most expensive, a two-year training course (12 weeks) costs less than the price of a greens mower, they simply refuse to believe that an Auto-Certes costs what it does!

Whilst it was true that, in the past, some Head Greenkeepers were reluctant to send their young staff for training, not so much because it disrupted work on the course as that it might end up with the youngsters competing in knowledge, this is an attitude which has largely (but not, sadly, entirely) been dispelled.

One could, indeed, be very sympathetic with any Head man faced with losing one or even two of his staff every Friday (yes, some colleges selected Friday for greenkeeper training!) to have their heads stuffed full of heresies such as liming and the need for phosphate and potash, but today the centralised colleges give a

first-class education to the younger men, in courses run by dedicated, knowledgeable enthusiasts and we desperately need more support for their work. This will reduce costs and improve course content.

The Greenkeeper Training Committee is generously supported by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews and modestly so by the Golf Unions and from a limited number of other sources. What is needed now is an enthusiastic drive, not just lip service acceptance, for better greenkeeper education in England especially, but the problem is how to get at the consumer, i.e. the Golf Clubs, and break the apathy, the outmoded reaction to education by some County Unions and to drive home the real financial benefits to all Golf Clubs of a better educated and trained greenkeeping staff, in terms of better presentation of courses, prevention and avoidance of problems rather than more expensive cures after the damage is done - and most of all in having available a pool of trained staff from which to select new or replacement staff, instead of the present highly unsatisfactory situation, where Clubs are

more or less forced to poach other Clubs' Head men in the event of their own retiring or departing.

Many of the students who have passed through Elmwood near St Andrews, by common consent the best greenkeeper training centre in Britain, have come in earlier years from England and Ireland. All have found good posts and all have improved their courses and reduced maintenance costs. What we need is not only the same quality of training facilities - which we are well on the way to achieving in the five centres in England, but the same enthusiastic support from the English Golf Clubs as is given to Elmwood (and two other centres) in Scotland.

Direct appeal

Perhaps this may have to be achieved by a direct appeal over the County Unions' heads by the EGU, but what is certain is that golf is as much subjected to the laws of commerce as is any other business, and poor training or even absence of training can be a potent source of financial problems in industry. Better trained staff means better presented courses and such training

benefits every member and might cost them individually only 50p to £1 per year (and hidden in their subscriptions at that).

What we are talking about is investment in the 21st Century. If golf courses are regarded as suffering from being over-played in 1986, this is really nothing to the pressures of golf courses in the next 25 years.

We must train young Greenkeepers to cope with the effect of this predictable extra use in all its aspects. When the experienced, older men retire, as they must in the next decade or so, all Clubs must be able to draw on a pool of experienced, well-educated, capable Course Managers - and, we repeat, there is no man more important on any golf course than a fully trained Head man, and, furthermore, his skill has an immediate and positive effect on maintenance costs.

In the ultimate analysis, it is the duty of all Golf Clubs to support greenkeeper training and to put over to their members the benefits, at no cost to them, of better preparation and presentation, which can only come from experience and education - the two are inseparably linked.

THE COLLEGES IN ENGLAND APPROVED AND RECOMMENDED BY THE GREENKEEPER TRAINING COMMITTEE ARE

Askham Bryan College of Agriculture
Askham Bryan
York. YO2 3PR. Contact: N. Bisset

Cheshire College of Agriculture
Reaseheath
Nantwich
Cheshire. CW5 6DH. Contact: D. Mottram

Hampshire College of Agriculture
Sparsholt
Winchester
Hants. SO21 2NF. Contact: R. Young

Plumpton Agricultural College
Lewes
Sussex BN7 3AE. Contact: D. Fitton

Somerset College of Agriculture
Cannington
Bridgwater
Somerset TA5 2LF. Contact: N. Rigden

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An apartment is available if desired. Cannes Mougins is an 18 hole course and the venue for the Cannes Open.

For further details telephone 0787-61635 or apply direct to:

Mr. Lemoine,
Cannes Mougins Golf and Country Club,
175 Route d'Antibes,
06250 Mougins, France.