

GOLF COURSE MAINTENANCE NOW - A PERSONAL VIEW BY EDDIE PARK

IN THE November '85 and April '86 issues of *Greenkeeper*, I wrote articles on the problems encountered in the reclamation of indigenous turf and the sorry state of our winter golf. Now, in early 1987, it is timely to take another look at British courses and try to establish the problems that are most exercising the minds of those at the 'sharp end.'

So, what are the problems?

Each year, they are becoming more severe and technically more diverse. They are mainly man-made, including the ever-increasing problem of compaction. Last year, just for a change, every season was late and this type of variation occurs frequently enough to rate as a normal hazard.

I know some think I am a doom and gloom merchant, who exaggerates today's problems and views the past through rose-coloured spectacles. Time will tell who is right. In fact, 'time' is a most important word. My impression is that it can take a long time to really wreck a golf course - maybe as long as eighty years on some intrinsically good sites.

The worrying feature is that the pace of deterioration has quickened. Many people have confused all this with a move to a more modern form of the game and lack the scientific knowledge to appreciate that the end result could be devastation. Let us be clear about one thing, attempts to produce 'modern' golf, with year-round receptive greens, involve maintaining those greens at a fixed point in the natural process of decay.

"North of Watford, at least, that situation may just be changing, particularly as we are now beginning to see the wholesale digging up of greens that have been wrecked by mistaken policies."



A thatched green is dug up.

This is far too difficult a trick for mere mortals and the inevitable result has been a big drop in standards. In turn, these have been disguised by the fact that sufficient customers seem prepared to continue to pay for what are demonstrably poor conditions. North of Watford, at least, that situation may just be changing, particularly as we are now beginning to see the wholesale digging up of greens that have been wrecked by mistaken policies.

On the positive side, I find numerous examples of greenkeepers with ambition who have taken on great sites in a poor state and are backing their expertise and courage to produce real improvements - David Jones when at Purdis Heath, John Philp at Carnoustie, Kevin Munt, until recently up at Dornoch, and David Spurden at Ganton are just the first examples that come to mind.

I think, however, it is worthwhile looking in more detail at the difficulties greenkeepers tell me they encounter when trying to reclaim indigenous turf. Undoubtedly, some just go too fast - more than one course manager has remarked to me that it is easy to get rid of *Poa annua*. The really difficult trick is to bring along bents and fescues at the same speed.

In a dry year, it's child's play to make life impossible for *Poa*, but much more of a task to produce the right balance of conditions for what I call 'our' grasses. Equally, of course, some people go too slowly and find that what they fondly hope is the 'middle way' is no way at all. Sufficient aeration without the degree of trauma that antagonises members is not impossible, but it is difficult to please all the members all of the time.

Many greenkeepers are coming under increasing pressure to succeed in their agreed aeration programmes without any disruption to play and have had to compromise on the number of passes each green receives. Better to do it deep enough and often enough and hold out the promise that the worst will soon be over.

To do that, it is essential to be equipped with machinery that really gets deep enough without making too much mess and in as short a time as possible. Such machinery does exist, but too often I find a club trying to manage with something inadequate.

I have a lot of doubts about the efficacy of many of the hollow-tining operations I have seen. Poor penetration means that only the surface drainage is improved and the water lies on

the still-compacted layer three inches down. The green feels softer simply because the surface layer remains wet and the golfer doesn't really appreciate the 'pegboard' effect.

We could do with a more objective method of measuring degrees of compaction – it is very difficult to make comparisons having regard for seasonal variations.

Irrigation can be greatly reduced and should be carefully recorded but, here again, I find courses without even a meter to measure how much water was put on (and when) and no records of rainfall. An old shallow spiker can be modified to keep the surfaces of greens just 'pricked' in drier seasons. Together with monthly spraying of wetting agents, the requirements for irrigation can be dramatically reduced.

When I have spoken at greenkeepers' meetings, I have found considerable agreement from experienced men that many problems stem from non-uniform construction giving, especially, varying permeability. An efficient hand-watering system, with adequate pressure, quick couplers and good green-to-green transport can make it possible for a skilled staff to do a good job.

Having got all this basic husbandry right, then, surely, everything must be plain sailing? Well, as some people have discovered, this is not always so. Those who have disposed of their thatch find it a daunting prospect that there is still the little matter of reducing the dominance of *Poa annua*. It doesn't even seem to be a constant picture from week to week.

This is the point at which it is so necessary to regard each green as a space where the grass population can be varied by management of ecological factors. And if a week is a long time in politics, it is an even longer time in the grass population of a green. Patience, subtlety and sheer cunning are required.

Worse still, there are some really nasty snakes to slide down. Looking back through pre-war Lindrick reports by R.B. Dawson and R.P. Libbey, I can read of dry patch problems and appreciate what heartache it caused. It's still around today at some courses and I certainly admire anyone with the fortitude to cope over the long time it takes to get these problems under control.

I hinted last year that at Lindrick we had a summer problem – at the first hint of stress from drought or heat, we saw some of our *agrostis* curl up its toes. This only happened to *agrostis*, not *Poa annua* (which we might have expected) and certainly not *fescue*, which looked healthier than ever. These grasses could be growing unaffected only inches away, so we called it 'Bents Disease.' Nobody seemed to have a definite diagnosis.

After a few weeks, the grass seemed to recover, although we would have been happier to see it displaced by a grass without these disadvantages. Keen observation by course manager Kevin Hazlehurst and his staff showed that there was deficient root growth in these areas for some time before they saw any



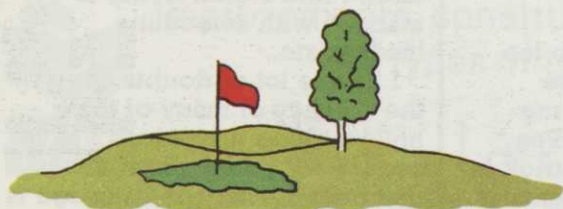
'Bents Disease' close-up – *Agrostis* on the left, *Festuca* on the right.

The Berkshire's may be really special...

...but if you need a new irrigation system, or your old one just improved to the highest standards contact...

GOLF LANDSCAPES IRRIGATION

regional **TORO** distributor



ASHWELLS ROAD
BENTLEY, BRENTWOOD
ESSEX. CM15 9SR

Telephone: (0277) 73720
Telex: 995215 GOLF LG

The proven experience in the field

"Dr Neil Baldwin, the new plant pathologist at the STRI, has now taken this research under his wing and he already thinks he has seen the same conditions at Ganton. I think he may well find it in a lot more places, too."

symptoms. Dr Neil Baldwin, the new plant pathologist at the STRI, has now taken this research under his wing and he already thinks he has seen the same conditions at Ganton. I think he may well find it in a lot more places, too.

After three summers of suffering, we have worked out a palliative remedy - well before trouble strikes, our staff are treating these affected areas (and only these areas - lest we encourage *Poa annua* elsewhere) with selective irrigation.

So, what of the future? Well, I reckon that 'now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party,' as the old saying goes. Let's forget the past and just accept that, with few exceptions, most clubs got it wrong at some time or another.

I hope that the campaign in *Golf Monthly* to encourage authorities to grasp a whole range of responsibilities will bear fruit. National problems demand national remedies - they cannot be shuffled off on to individual clubs. Golfers must be educated to realise that

better golf costs more and requires expertise, not least among men who represent them on committees.

I have been impressed, when asked into clubs to explain things with the help of slides, at the amount of interest shown nowadays by so many golfers. That must be a good sign. Incidentally, this does seem to be a possible way to get members off greenkeepers' backs, albeit time-consuming.

And what about greenkeepers? A united association and a better training scheme will not, in themselves, solve all the problems. I can speak with forty years experience of belonging to a profession. To be seen to embrace ethical responsibilities, the desire to use advisers in a productive fashion, the wish to learn as much as possible (not just about the interesting aspects, but the whole subject) are the ways to improve status, not by some kind of decree. There are many daunting tasks ahead for the new association and I hope they will not forget the essential PR component.

Sensible changes

The advisers? It must be evident to all that future success depends on a willingness to make some sensible changes in their ways of operating. A visit to a course followed by a report, however helpful at the time, needs extensive follow-ups. Committees have to be

convinced that potentially traumatic policies are right and necessary, even if it requires a presentation to the members. Very often the interpretation of a prescribed policy is no easy task.

It is no criticism of Dr Peter Hayes to say that many of us would like to see a more commercial attitude at the STRI, offering a fuller service by well-paid advisers. It is, as usual, a chicken and egg situation with demand from customers a prerequisite.

I just wonder if the board of management at the STRI, composed as it is of men who proclaim ignorance of the technicalities, is able to make it all happen.

One can only applaud their administrative expertise and their generosity in giving up a great deal of time, but is this going to be enough?

"I have been impressed, when asked into clubs to explain things with the help of slides, at the amount of interest shown nowadays by so many golfers. That must be a good sign. Incidentally, this does seem to be a possible way to get members off greenkeepers' backs, albeit time-consuming."

**WE'LL BE
DELIGHTED
TO DEMONSTRATE**



HUXLEYS GRASS MACHINERY ON TOP, ON TURF.

We'll give you the cutting edge in the rough and on the smooth.

Call us today for the full facts on Huxley Hydraulic Reelmowers for compact and smaller-sized tractors and the Cushman Front Line range of ride-on rotary mowers.

HUXLEYS GRASS MACHINERY
THE DEAN, NEW ALRESFORD,
HANTS SO24 9BL, ENGLAND.
Tel: 0962 73 3222 Telex: 894426
Fax: 0962 73 4702

