Mowing down Ballesteros

SEVERIANO BALLESTEROS

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During the Epson Grand Prix,

Severiano Ballesteros criticised

your greens. Why? And what

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Why he criticised them only

Seve can say. But from what I

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somewhat, as it was only three
days before that I was told Seve

liked the greens, but he thought

that, if the dry weather

continued, they might need

watering to stop them from

becoming too hard, or was it

“firm?”

What was your answer?

His comments were made to me

via a third party, Tony Gray of

the PGA European Tour, and I

replied that they were being cut

at 1/8th of an inch, which is the

lowest I would mow my greens

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European Tour guidelines for

tournament play.

Did any member of the Press

ask for your side of the story?

Only one, Michael Williams of

the Daily Telegraph. Donald

Steel, the architect and golf

writer, was visiting the course

on business and, from his

comments in The Sunday

Telegraph, he knows enough

about greenkeeping to give an

opinion.

Can a tournament professional

compare United States

conditions with United Kingdom

conditions?

They can’t be compared.

However, professionals do make

their own comparisons. Why, I

will never know. I wouldn’t

compare conditions in North

Yorkshire to those on the South

Coast and expect them to be the

same in early May, let alone

compare courses in Augusta to

those in South Wales.

What were the PGA European

Tour instructions? Did you

carry them out and did they

support you when you came

under such criticism?

Tony Gray inspected the course

on the Monday evening. He was

happy with its condition –

putting surfaces were firmer and

smoother than last year. Any

instructions were limited to

where pins had to be sited and

he knew that the Tour’s

guidelines on heights of cut

were being followed. Yes, I

think they were supportive,

inasmuch as they accepted that

to cut any lower would not have

been good for the turf.

Would you ever consider

mowing your greens lower than

1/8th of an inch?

As you know, St Pierre is the

flagship of the Country Club

Hotels group of courses. My

main concern is to ensure that,

for the many thousands of guests

and societies that use our

courses and stay at the hotel

throughout the year, the courses

are presented in the finest

condition possible. I would not

be able to be sure of this if we

mowed the greens at less than

1/8th in early May. Under

normal circumstances, we don’t

mow less than 5/32 and this

height would not be set until

the end of May/early June.

All my greenkeepers take a

pride in their work. They all

know that the course was

presented in better condition

this year than last and that it will

be even better next year and the

year after. Greens will become

SEVE, ARE YOU SURE?

Here we go again! Probably the world’s greatest golfer, respected throughout our profession for his playing prowess, has decided to speak out on another aspect of the game. Fine. Seve is entitled – and better qualified than many – to his opinion, but, on this occasion, some of his comments appear to be misplaced.

Greenkeeper interviews the course manager Seve ‘challenged’, David Jones of St Pierre.

Golf: DONALD STEEL

that he was applying a principle

regardless of circumstance. The

more apt question is who should

do it. What happens in the year

when Greenkeepers don’t offer tips
to professionals on how to play

and so they should return the

compliment. Preparing courses

for tournaments in Britain is

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professionals when they make this type of comment?
To give Seve the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he meant that, compared to Augusta, St Pierre's greens were slower. True! If Europe hopes to win the Ryder Cup, it needs to practise on greens of the same pace as the ones it is to play on. True! But don't look for fast greens in this country in early May, except perhaps on links courses.

What was Jim Arthur's view when he walked the course the following day?
Jim said the course was in the best possible condition for the time of year, with the grass species we have on the greens at the moment, which is the plague of most golf greens in our country, Poa Annua.

What are your long-term aims for St Pierre's greens?
These will be achieved through sound greenkeeping principles to bring about the change required in the grass content of the greens, which will give faster putting surfaces. Surely, it must be common sense to realise that, if firm, fast greens were possible by merely scalping all the grass off, then every golf course in the country would have tournament standard putting surfaces all the year round?

What reason do you give for the Poa Annua problem on most greens in the UK?
I hope that, at long last, greenkeepers now know the reasons - too much water, the application of NPK fertilisers and compaction due to frequent play. Water can be cut down to a minimum, fertiliser applied sensibly in the form of nitrogen only and play can be counteracted by an increase in aeration through a regular slitting of greens programme.

It is all too easy to 'peak' up greens by feeding, watering and then scalping down for a four-day tournament. Any amateur lawn expert can do that.

You sound as if you are a firm believer in what Jim Arthur advocates.
Yes, I am. I have known Jim for some time now. I have listened and followed his advice and seen the results. There is no doubt that, if the principles he has advocated for many years had previously been followed at St Pierre and on other courses he advises, they would not have Poa Annua dominated greens. Too many greenkeepers don't follow 'traditional greenkeeping policy' and yet say they do. Unfortunately, the proof is in the pudding their members have to play on in winter.

Would it have been possible, bearing in mind the good weather you have had, to have brought the course on more by such an early date?
If you are asking could I have produced more grass, the answer is 'yes' by the heavy use of fertilisers. But the problem for Seve was too much grass, not too little. We topdressed the greens twice before the tournament, the last dressing going on at the end of April. This incorporated a small amount of sulphate of ammonia, hoof and horn and iron sulphate. We suspended our aeration programme at the start of April.

Seven days prior to the Epson event, all the greens were sprayed with a seaweed extract, which incorporated iron to produce a pleasant picture for television. We used iron to avoid producing any sort of fast-growing sward, which would have caused the pace of the greens to slow down. Seven days before the tournament, we were cutting at 5/32 coming down to 1/8 two days prior to the event. This height was then maintained for the tournament's duration. The last verti-cutting of the greens took place on the Tuesday before the tournament. Fairways and tees were also sprayed with iron sulphate to give good definition.

What would the course have played like if we had had a normal spring?
I don't think that, apart from not having as many leaves out on the trees, it would have looked, or played, any differently. We wintered well this year. I didn't have the scars on the greens from fusarium attack that I inherited when I was appointed in February 1986, so I was not desperate for fill-in growth. If anything, the early spring this year caused the meadowgrass to flower which, from a pace point of view, would have made the greens slower than the week before.

Perhaps it's time the golf professional prepared for the course and stopped expecting the course to be prepared for him. Then perhaps we might see some true professionalism in golf, based on sound judgement on the putting greens and not geared to some sort of robot-like putting stroke.

David Jones - few sought his side of the story...