

Mowing down Ballesteros

Golf: DONALD STEEL

SEVERIANO BALLESTEROS was largely preaching to the converted last Sunday when he delivered his sermon on firm, fast greens, even if he thought his was a lone voice crying in the wilderness.

The difference between fast and slow greens is roughly the equivalent of playing tennis on grass and clay, or trying to bowl leg-spinners on a wicket with bounce.

Margins for error are less. Touch, judgment and nerve have to be finely-tuned, but the false premise on which Ballesteros' based his argument was

that he was applying a principle regardless of circumstance. The more apt question is should the presence of professionals for one week in the year override what happens on the other 51? Greenkeepers don't offer tips to professionals on how to play, and so they should return the compliment. Preparing courses for tournaments in Britain in May is not the same as preparing courses in the southern states of America or even northern Spain.

Conditions rarely co-operate at this time of year in allowing greenkeepers to provide the fast greens that they would like and which most know is right. How often have we seen greenkeepers act against their better judgment, cut too low in a cold April and then face the wrath of tournament players because there is no grass?

Ballesteros will find that greens will get faster as the summer progresses, although I doubt anything in Europe will be as quick as the greens for the US Open or Ryder Cup at Muirfield Village.

Regular close cutting conforms very much with Peter Thomson's long-held belief that the art of greenkeeping consists not so much in knowing how to get the grass to grow as knowing how to keep it down. But whatever the complaints of Ballesteros and Bernhard Langer at St. Pierre, which last Sunday celebrated its 25th anniversary, Jeff Hawkes found no problem.

In his defeat of Ballesteros, he had a total of only 19 putts on 15 greens, so no wonder Ballesteros was quick to add that he wasn't blaming the greens for his defeat. Nevertheless, he would have been better advised to have kept his mouth shut.

At best, he stood to be misunderstood; at worst, he ran the risk of upsetting those who work their hardest for the welfare of the players for a tiny fraction of the reward.



Ballesteros... better to keep quiet

● REPRODUCED FROM THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, MAY 17, 1987.

During the Epson Grand Prix, Severiano Ballesteros criticised your greens. Why? And what did he say?

Why he criticised them only Seve can say. But from what I later heard, he felt the greens should have been faster if the European team is to stand any chance against the USA in the next Ryder Cup match. He said they had too much grass on them and he thought they should have been scalped. The fact that he was having a problem surprised me 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 and this conforms to the PGA 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

SEVE, ARE YOU SURE?

Here we go again! This time, 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.

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

firmer and faster not by scalping, but by good long-term management and by obtaining the right grass species to give less resistance to the ball as it rolls. This must be the aim of every golf course manager.

What do you think of 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 commonsense 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-



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

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 are you 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 Epsom 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.