How the PGA provides a strong
Bruce Jamieson, pictured, is a man who gets results. As Director of Agronomy for the PGA European Tour, that's one of many required skills. DAVID WHITE reports

'The final shot on the first play-off hole at Wentworth, a stiff-to-the-flag five iron from Seve... he's home and dry, a worthy winner of the PGA Championship.' Such is the stuff of which dreams are made and which makes golf such a perfect spectacle. But how are such courses prepared for a major championship?

To get the facts was not difficult, for the PGA European Tour boast as their Director of Agronomy Bruce Jamieson, a talented young Scot with a dead cert family background - his father and brother are both professionals - who has achieved his goal by working through the ranks as greenkeeper, head greenkeeper (at Powfoot and Royal Porthcawl) and who has never once dismissed the need to follow the learning curve. Learning was the very key to his present role and followed a familiar Scottish pattern of Elmwood College for City & Guilds in Greenkeeping, a positive and substantial portfolio of turf management and self-improvement courses at other colleges and finally graduation into 'fully trained management' - his ultimate aim - via examination and graduate membership of the Institute of Industrial Management. He is proof positive that greenkeeper education works!

At Porthcawl, where he masterminded the course for at least two National Championships, his skills were instantly recognised. In their wisdom the Club saw that he was outstripping his earning potential and planned for him to be released, as a designed campaign, to give advice to other Clubs in the area. In the event a different challenge presented itself and he joined the PGA European Tour as a Tour Administrator. Suddenly things were not the same. Opportunities abound for a man of knowledge and in offering advice to the green staff at a Tour venue in Italy and subsequently at other European venues, his skills of communication were observed and monitored to an extent that within a short space of time he was appointed to his present role by PGA European Tour Executive Director, Ken Schofield.

How did it happen? It seems simple enough, for he has a gentleness and calm that inspires confidence. He talks with people, not at them. He listens; he has sympathy; he understands. He's been there. Above all he doesn't tell people what to do, he merely suggests better or different ways of achieving a goal - the goal that both parties want. And he gets results.

I was interested to learn how he ensured reaching what is all-important to tournament players: that the quality of the course and the condition in which it is presented to them is as good as it possibly can be. How, for example, does the whole thing start?

A tour venue, once mooted, gets to first base only after several imponderables have been thoroughly examined and the site found to meet specific criteria. Location is, naturally enough, -
Methyl Bromide gassing

Get rid of

We've had a situation over the past 20 years where consultants like Jim Arthur and the STRI have given good solid advice for maintaining bent and fescue and achieving them back into the sward he said. But it's a very slow process and I believe golfers today are too impatient and don't want to wait years for good surfaces. Anyone thinking they can revert 100% Poa to bent and fescue in under ten years by slow management methods is dreaming. They'll never get it back to 30% in the first two years, but getting rid of that 30% is going to take another ten years. Then you have the problem of seed that's been laid down in the thatch layer still germinating maybe two years after. Therefore you can have an invasion of the sward any time opportunity presents itself to the Poa remaining.

You've also got several different types of Poa in greens, not just one. There's a stoloniferous variety and one that grows by rhizomes as well, so all the slitting that we do to greens, although it encourages the bent grass to shoot stolons and rhizomes, actually encourages the Poa as well. It's easy to say you will get rid of Poa annua - meaning the seeded head producing variety - yes, you certainly will, but whether you get rid of the variety spreading by stolons, that's another matter, and I don't believe you will.

At El Salar they have a Poa problem and every three years they take four greens, cover them with polythene after aerifying with a hollow tine, and gas them with Methyl Bromide. It kills the greens stone dead to a depth of four inches. They clean up the thatch, leave it for two weeks, score new seed into the soil - in their case pure Penncross, which germinates in six days - and in six weeks they have a fine putting surface which lasts for three to five years, or even longer, depending on how they're managed. I believe that's a route we should consider in Britain. If you've got a Poa green and want to get rid of it, gas it! Get it cleaned out, sterilise the soil, re-seed it with what you want and manage it accordingly. I believe you can then retain it, but
You've got to do something to kill all the seeds in the ground and sterilisation by the Methyl Bromide method is, in my opinion, as good as any.

"Why", I asked 'is this not more widely known, why don't the STRI advocate such a programme?'. 'I don't know', he said. 'Maybe they have thought about it but think it's an unacceptable option. For those Clubs that come off their greens in October, and there are more and more enlightened ones that do - for protection, or to attempt to solve high percentage Poa problems, bad thatch layer or what have you - and when a sensible man - why not start again'.

But it works', he insisted, 'it's been proven and results cannot lie. Why should greenkeepers suffer, why should they have such doubts? Why not just kill it and start again. We have this dogma in Britain about retaining what we have, no matter how bad it is - why not start again?'.

Again Bruce stressed that the PGA European Tour is not in the business of changing golf courses. 'We're criticised enough for the height of cut used during tournaments, but before I came into this post there wasn't a Tour official who had ever worked on a golf course full time. No official ever advocated a specific height of cut. It was a greenkeeper that set the height at one-eighth, no one else. To scream "don't do it" because it's damaging, everything we do is damaging to grass, cutting to an eighth isn't very helpful to it, cutting at five-eighths if it's Poa pratensis isn't very healthy - it's going to die. We put grass in a situation where it's meant to grow tall and we hack it back every day.'

Bruce also suggested that much more research was needed in Britain on fertilisation. Not enough scientific data was available to the greenkeeper, with inaccurate application often causing root desiccation in most grasses - the only one growing healthily being Poa! He feels that too little research is being done into what nitrogen actually does to the roots and shoots. 'There's a point where you actually start losing roots for shoot growth', he said, 'when fertiliser has been applied and the grass is lush, then the surface speed will be slower, or when water has been applied heavily. But in general terms, cutting at three-sixteenths makes a speed of eight an achievable figure if all the correct management procedures are followed. On tournaments a speed of 9.5 to 10.6, consistent on all greens, is ideal, though on severe sloping ground a speed of eight is better and avoids the vexing problem of a ball scampering several feet past the cup and off the green. That's silly, it doesn't create good golf, rather it..."
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