May I address Mr Gray (February letters) through your columns, thus?
In your letter in Greenkeeper International you felt that you must enter the fray. I am glad you did, because apathy is one of the greatest enemies of greenkeeping and I am sure you are sincere in your beliefs.

I am equally sure that people like Jim Arthur, who by the way clearly states his view ‘beyond argument’, in his October article, Steve Isaac of the STRI, Jack McMillan and even Neil Whitaker of Woburn (see February issue), are also sincere in their beliefs; in fact Neil Whitaker’s experiences seem to contradict yours entirely. Anyway, the pace of any putting surface is a personal interpretation and comes second, in my opinion, to smoothness.

Your comments on cutting height are interesting and the first part I agree with entirely. On the second, I note you say that your surfaces are firm but not solid and unyielding. Therefore my point on accuracy still stands. As you seem to use a ruler and straight edge, you obviously do not put much emphasis on accuracy. I use a height of cut setter which is both obvious do not put much emphasis on accuracy and the first part I agree with entirely. Concerning winter cutting, I cannot agree more, and never raise the mowing height to more than 6mm.

Finally I prefer to work with millimetres, as I feel the sooner we accept the metric scale, the less painful it will be in the long run. I do not, by the way, object to you or anyone else using sixteenths, as long as you stick to this unit, and do not jump about between eighths, quarters, halves, thirty secondths, and even sixty fourths!

I like to learn about greenkeeping techniques, and enjoy nothing more than a good chin wag with a fellow greenkeeper. I have learnt a great deal from such face to face discussions. I do, however, change my mind if I find that I am wrong. Do you?

PN BERTINSHAW
Head Greenkeeper, Royal Norwich Golf Club

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He is also aware of alternative interim measures should greater speed of roll be deemed necessary, infinitely better indeed than the severely detrimental effects of close mowing on a fine fescue population in particular, a widely accepted fact especially when combined with the abrasive effects of wear and tear from the intensity of play consistent with the majority of courses nowadays.

Mr Gray’s diagnosis here is plainly incorrect and the very fact that he is mowing at 1/8”, sometimes, it appears, even lower, and twice a day at that, is indicative of a sword lacking certainly in fine fescues and which may contain a percentage of bent species interspersed with a dominance of Poa annua and perhaps some patches of Yorkshire Fog. I am assuming here, of course, that the head greenkeepers on the courses under Mr Gray’s control do indeed carry out this severe mowing regime. They may however make their own adjustments to any formal programme and hence protect and maintain fine species present.

He may well have firm greens but his mowing heights inform us that although, yes, he has attained a thatch free turf, possibly well drained, he has gone no further towards true quality nor cannot with such close mowing practices. He has taken what has been seen as the “easy” way to fulfill a requirement or trend, the quest for speed, to the detriment of the finer species and consequently the production of all year round quality surfaces, at the same time forsaking the correct turf resilience so important for surface ball reaction so typical of fescue/bent turf.

Jeff Perri’s statement comes to mind here when he said “it is unfair to condemn the men with Poa annua greens when you know that one of the main contributory factors is the pressure from members to mow too closely,” and here we have a turf manager willingly carrying out such practices! Interestingly, Mr Gray does not mention grass species or relevant percentages present or indeed any overseeding programme for the golf courses under his control, although he does mention the case of the bowling greens which are closed for half the year.

This point is significant, as is the fact that Mr Gray still found it necessary to overseed his bowling greens for the past three years in the autumn despite the fact as he states, “The bowling greens still retained the high percentage of fine grasses found at the start of the season”, following his close mowing regime. This obvious contradiction begs the question, why then the seemingly needless expense of overseeding? If this does not represent a serious indictment of faulty mowing practices, I don’t know what does!

Why put whatever fine turf species you may have (or have recently sown) on golf greens under unnecessary physiological stress? Mr Gray must be aware of the adverse effects of extremely close mowing on plant rooting capability particularly at prime periods such as late

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summer and early autumn, not to mention the general weakening of the plant through resultant excessive leaf tissue removal, enhancing the abrasive effects of wear and tear and the inevitable invasion of Poa annua on the fine turf which is so essential for the game of golf. In no other sport is the turf species so critical to the playing of the game.

Of course if Poa annua dominance is accepted then all of these pales into insignificance due to the inherent capabilities of this opportunistic weed which can never produce acceptable surfaces for year round play!

Coming to Mr Gray's point regarding cutting height trials on bent grass plots at St Ives in the thirties, surely the fact that the STRI (as he himself acknowledges) have long since documented and published the shortcomings of existing mowing practices on fine turf, particularly fescues, is the paramount highlight of the obvious inadequacy of said trials in relation to the practicalities we now know.

This re-assessment of past 'advice' in the light of modern technology and understanding of pedological aspects, for instance in fine turf production and maintenance, is not new. It is not that long ago the STRI were advising NPK compound fertilisers for general use on fine turf! Like all research and development programmes, some previous findings or conclusions, although not all, have to be abandoned as progress is made and naturally the same analogy applies to old books on greenkeeping or golf books containing chapters on course upkeep, where quite often only a percentage of the information therein is of any practical value, either then or now. Certain basic principles remain true however (i.e. the need for well-drained, well structured, un-compacted soils of low fertility).

A cutting height over the winter period of approximately 5/16" is the normal on fescue/bent turf for obvious reasons and perfectly suitable surfaces ensue. Contamination with ryegrass patches of course spoil good, clean surfaces and necessitate physical removal. Incidentally I have seen perfectly good surfaces produced over winter on fescue greens with an occasional light roll being the only requirement following a raising of mowing height to 5/16" in October as growth falls. The only 'corse growth' I have experienced on the 'winter' tees is when the caddie practice is on the nine holes of the course. 'Winter tees' usually mean a neglectable, muddy piece of ground approximately 3 yards by 2 yards and 50 yards in from the front of the tee.

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