Soiled again

With the forthcoming publication of the R&A's Joint Golf Course Committee's specification for recommended methods of constructing putting greens, based on three alternatives, with no compromising mixing from one to another, the whole vexed question of soil analyses re-emerges.

There is no point in setting out standards controlling the materials to be used unless those materials are readily available and their quality can be checked by reliable analysis against the stated criteria. Equally, it is a pointless exercise if analyses take so long that the start of construction would be seriously delayed; if the results were so erratic or illogical that no one could trust them, or if the cost were so high as to prohibit their use in any save very expensive contracts.

The sad fact is there is absolutely no consistency between the results of physical analyses on the same material when analysed by different laboratories.

To be believed, results must be believable! Illogical results, which cannot be either defended or repeated, bring the whole system into disrepute. This problem is by no means confined to laboratories in Britain - nor indeed in Europe. If the USDA Green Section claims that it can rely on only a bare handful of soil laboratories throughout the length and breadth of the States to report consistently accurate results, even when they are working to published standard methods of soil analysis, we are unlikely to be any better here, more especially because work on standard methods of analysis is by no means complete - and furthermore even when it is it will hard ar a subject that mere green of over 3000%! In another equally well authenticated case, the delays together with a huge bill of the first two batches of results being scrapped and a new start made - which then show satisfactory figures turn up!

Equally, it is a pointless exercise if analyses re-emerges.

The first step must be to lay down methods which must be followed and then to check on all the laboratories offering soil analysis services. I venture to suggest that it will be a long time before laboratories can be trusted to produce consistently logical, reliable and physical analyses results. (Chemical analyses are no problem but are limited, or if they want to prove me wrong, let them offer to demonstrate and compete with each other for veracity if not cost. Because, believe me, when laboratories demand £150 or thereabouts per sample and we may need scores of samples before the best materials are identified, then we are talking money - and the national golfing body which should be the regulator has not thought, it would seem, about financing their recommendations or actions, e.g. in checking and comparing soil laboratories.

So where is this likely to lead us?

Frankly, I can see little real value to any reasonably experienced and educated adviser in using soil analyses except to check on their own courses and on those produced to which I have never been given any (let alone a satisfactory) reply by soil chemists, fertiliser salesmen, or even most advisers is at what level of phosphates are reported, particularly if phosphorus deficiency, i.e. when does it need phosphatic fertiliser?

When some of our most superb bent and rescue greens on links or heathland courses show levels of phosphate below 10 ppm (mg/litre) and some of our worst annual meadow grass greens, even on famous links, show 1500 ppm of phosphate, can you make a case for apply any phosphates? Please that these pundits should consult the enormous bibliography on this subject, starting with Dr. Murray in 1903 in South Africa (who show reports are reported to be phosphate below 10 ppm (mg/litre) and be sued for supplying unsuitable materials). As a result they cannot be used for setting standards leads to all manner of evasions and cost cutting - or, if obeyed, to huge and unnecessary extra costs.

Laboratories will naturally try to defend their results. They will blame sampling mistakes, variations in raw material sources, even on one occasion un believably blaming illogical variations because of differences in the day of the week that the samples arrived - anything but their analysis methods. Analyses are only as accurate as the sampling, I admit, but such sampling variations are on quite a small scale. When samples tested for hydrological conductivity are reputed to vary between 0.17 hr and 28" hr on the same green with the material bulk-mixed centrally on site, clearly it is the analysis technique which is to blame. The one is equivalent to a concrete slab and the other a capital brain - i.e. indefensible and illogical!

There is no point in drawing up detailed specifications and in laying down performance criteria if these cannot be checked speedily and cheaply by reliable analyses. There have been too many cases of wild and inexplicable variations in the results on the same samples sent to different and sometimes even to the same laboratories, for anyone to be able to have any faith in them. The first step must be to lay down methods which must be followed and then to check on all the laboratories offering soil analysis services. I venture to suggest that it will be a long time before laboratories can be trusted to produce consistently logical, reliable and physical soil analyses results. (Chemical analyses are no problem but are limited, or if they want to prove me wrong, let them offer to demonstrate and compete with each other for veracity if not cost. Because, believe me, when laboratories demand £150 or thereabouts per sample and we may need scores of samples before the best materials are identified, then we are talking money - and the national golfing body which should be the regulator has not thought, it would seem, about financing their recommendations or actions, e.g. in checking and comparing soil laboratories.

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some artificial, indefensible and unproven standards always end in tears.

The only important nutrient for fine turf is nitrogen, for which there are no sensitive tests. There is enough phosphate and almost always enough potash to meet the very modest demands of finer grasses. Trace elements are never needed on golf courses. The ideal pH is the one you've got. Remember the old adage - "if it ain't broke, don't try to fix it'.

There can thus be little if any justification for spending money on chemical analyses, which all too often are on offer as a sales gimmick or an alternative to sound management advice, which chemists seem to lack. Physical soil analyses are a different matter, but to date the unreliability and inconsistency of results on the same materials from different (and even the same) laboratories is so great that it is too clear that we have a long way to go before any reliance can be placed on the results.

My advice is to keep your hands in your pockets (analyses are very expensive) and let the grass tell you what it needs. Rubbing a soil sample between finger and thumb is, I regret, a far more accurate way of analysing than taking it to many testing laboratories.

The secret is to follow austere greenkeeping: minimal fertiliser and nitrogen only; strictly controlled irrigation; intensive deep aeration; the use of compatible top dressings to the existing root zone. Then, as night follows day, you will succeed in proving that you don't need soil analyses to what it needs. Rubbing a soil sample between finger and thumb is, I regret, a far more accurate way of analysing than taking it to many testing laboratories.

A.James & A.Ramsden (Budock Vean) 40pts (2nd). A.Hayes Hughes and B Wilmot, with longest drives won by the prisoners kindly donated by members and guests. Second - C Allan; A Cale; A Ford & R Elder. Third - G Barr; P Ward; G Meldrum & B Wilmot; Fourth - P Ray; A Murray; J Warner & T Collier. Nearset the pin competitions were won by T Bartz; C Allan; R Hughes and B Wilmot, with longest drives won by the prisoners, S Shelford and P Ray.

Devon & Cornwall

Seveny nine members and trade guests attended our Christmas meeting on Wednesday 9 December, which was again held at Okehampton GC. Despite weeks of rain, Richard Harris and his staff had the course in excellent playing order for our Greensomeness competition for the PJ Flegg Trophy. Our notion to walk after lunch, this highlighted with an inspection of the two new greens under construction. After an excellent Christmas dinner we were entertained by the superb Tank Sherman. Our note to appreciate the staff - all the very best in their new appointments at Sandridge Park and Rowlands Castle respectively, also to Nick Beadle, who is 'in between' courses at present. Finally, congratulations to Leigh Bennett and his wife on the birth of Rosie.

Mark Wilton

SURREY

Effingham GC hosted our final golf event of 1992 on 10 December on a course that was a credit to Peter Broadbent and his staff. Scoring was good with Brian Eastman 'stuffing' the rest and taking the turkey with 41 points. Thanks as ever to the Effingham club for their excellent hospitality and courtesy of the course.

Following prize presentations the AGM was held and in his chairman's report, Terry Huntly announced that 1992 had been a good year for the Surrey section with winter lectures and golf events very well attended. In addition, despite the generous donation of £1000 to the Littlehampton GC, there were insufficient funds to continue two of our committee members. The committee members were elected en-bloc for 1993, with no new committee members nominated.

Jim Parker stepped down as president, receiving thanks for his many years of support, and Bert Watson was promoted to president with Alec Bradshaw and Ron Johnson elected vice-presidents. Please note that Mike Yorston is now in charge of handicaps and secretary Derek Walder will be receiving competition entries directly in 1993.

Gareth Roberts of Hankley Common must have been nursing sore feet following his 126 holes of golf played for charity - this over the North Middlesex GC - starting at 7am and finishing at 4.15 pm.

Looking well ahead to 1994, if any member can offer the use of his golf club for section events, please contact Derek Walder.

Roger Tymeman

Cleveland

Congratulations to Ian Harrison of Darlington GC on his success in the ICI Premier greenkeeper of the Year award. This bright young head greenkeeper has put together a modern maintenance complex at Darlington with health and safety very much to the fore, along with exemplary record-keeping and a fine pesticide store. Ian's attitude to safety working is a model of efficiency and his staff are very supportive. Darlington GC should be very proud of 'their' man - good luck in the future, Ian.

Our December meeting took the form of a quiz - Cleveland BIGGA v Teeside IoG - sponsored by TurfCare of Co. Durham and chaired most ably by quiz-master Terry Charlton, TurfCare's managing director. The quiz victors were the IoG, though it could be said that the overall winner was the friendly atmosphere that pervaded throughout.

Congratulations to David Cook of Eaglescliffe GC on passing his F2A sprayer test.

Bruce Burnell

South Coast

For the first time ever a section tournament had to be cancelled due to poor weather. After days of heavy rain, including the day itself, the December Turkey Trot was cancelled, with players stranded in the clubhouse. Fortunately the bar remained open and with cable TV and several video games available members still had

Scottish Region Conference

on March 9th, 1993 at Oatridge College, Ecclesmachan, Broxburn, 9am to 4pm

Speakers: Alasdair Wellwood, Roy Auld, John Philp, BIGGA's Education Officer David Golding, Eddie Connaughton, Jon Albutt, Steven Miller from Oatridge College and Jim Grainger. Cost including morning coffee and lunch: £10 BIGGA members, £12.50 non-members. The conference is sponsored by the Scottish Region patrons.

More details from Elliott Small, Tel: 0259 311445