Education is the key

Ian Tomlinson's excellent article in the January issue of Greenkeeper International is a breath of fresh air for those of us who believe in traditional greenkeeping, and should be a warning for those who rely on the combination of fertilisers and chemicals. Working alone, with advanced technology, the use of banned and fertiliser use is being closely monitored would surely change the approach of many greenkeepers, and I firmly believe no matter what our suppliers tell us it is only a matter of time before we will be in the same position.

Ian describes in detail the causes of his Poa dominated greens and their subsequent failure. Excessive use of fertilisers and chemicals, with a minimal aerating programme is a recipe for disaster and Poa domination as well as a soaring chemical bill. It is time to step back and consider these principles he talks about and take a more cultural and environmentally friendly approach to greenkeeping. These principles are by no means new and have been the ones that Jim Arthur has long advocated. One of the most important factors, if we are to embark on such a radical change in policy and attitude, is the support of our association. It is evident in Central Government that water and fertiliser and water combined with a friendly approach to management, is the support of our membership. Education is the key! We must lead with authority, they will only act as they wish if appropriately empowered. It is an unfortunate fact that Greens Committees do not always have the best interests of the golf course in mind, because Captains, committees etc, are making decisions in the best interests of their own. Greens Committees do not always have the necessary freedom to conduct their business to the fullest extent of their knowledge and ability: could the R&A help us to emphasise the importance of the golf course to their members? It is evident in Central Government that water and fertiliser are trying to reassert authority, trying to reestablish the power they have ceded. Only when some in authority are educated are they confident enough to be able to lead. Greenkeepers must lead with authority, they will only stand aside to let their electrician rewiring their house, but I dare say he might indicate when he wants his power points repositioned, but I dare say he might indicate when he wants his power points repositioned. I would not expect him to overrule that manager unless he has good reason.

As a small aside for Dave Goodridge, my 20 years engineering were spent in the RAG. Richard Penley-Martin, Secretary, Stoneham Golf Club

A Golf Club Manager's view

Prior to becoming a Golf Club Manager I spent 20 years as an electronics engineer. When I became a manager in this environment I was aware of the skill sets of my key managers and employees. It was not my job to manage their areas rather to make sure that they understand what their role was and that had anything that they needed to do it.

When I came in to golf, the one area where I had no skills was greenkeeping so I filled this gap by attending courses run by BIGGA and STRI. The information gained has been supplemented by becoming an Associate Member of BIGGA and actually reading Ian's excellent article! This education programme must be able to rewrite his house, but I dare say he might indicate when he wants his power points repositioned. I would not expect him to overrule that manager unless he has good reason.

It is evident in Central Government that water and fertiliser are trying to reassert authority, trying to reestablish the power they have ceded. Only when some in authority are educated are they confident enough to be able to lead. Greenkeepers must lead with authority, they will only stand aside to let their electrician rewiring their house, but I dare say he might indicate when he wants his power points repositioned.

Ian Tomlinson should be aware that the SecretaryGeneral Manager is responsible for the running of the company and not just one part of it, therefore he should question what one of his heads of department is doing, but I wouldn't expect him to overrule that manager unless he has good reason.

Richard Penley-Martin, Secretary, Stoneham Golf Club

Working together for mutual benefit

I have been reading your recent correspondence with great interest and thought that I could provide some different angles.

While I agree that Course Managers must lead with authority, they will only be limited by the level of authority invested in them by their employer and can only act as they wish if appropriately empowered. It is an unfortunate fact that Greens Committees do not always have the best interests of the golf course in mind when they make important decisions.

I know of several instances where the use of temporary greens is diminishing because Captains, committees etc are overriding Greenskeepers' decisions in order to fulfill the day's intention of playing golf. I also know of two local courses where temporary greens are not employed at all, much to the Course Manager's concern.

Previous letters on this subject have commented on 'interference from Greens Committees' so this is clearly a common problem. (For 'interference' should we be reading 'ill-advised decisions'?). However, the Committee is in place to serve the best wishes of the members, and the Course Manager is employed with the same end. Regrettably for many members (including those in authority) the distinction between the short and long term health of the golf course is a difficult one to realise. Bearing these factors in mind, surely Course Managers and Club officials should be working together for the mutual benefit of both the golf course and the members? It is not unreasonable to expect teams to work together for the good of their sport, especially if they are confident enough to be able to do so. To avoid interference when they want their power points repositioned, I would not expect him to overrule that manager unless he has good reason.

To cases of interference, as I am

A. McCombie, Parkstone Golf Club

Northern Seminar thanks from Longhirst

Just a small note to say thank you to Doug Bell and Bert Cross for bringing the recent Northern Seminar to Longhirst Hall GC. The speakers were entertaining and very informative. A thank you must also go to the greenkeepers who travelled on a particularly cold and frosty day. It just goes to show the club members that greenkeepers do actually think of educating themselves! Looking forward to hosting next year's autumn competition. Regards, Graham Chambers, Course Manager, Longhirst Hall, Northumberland
A stress reducing equation

It's a simple law of economics taught to every GCSE student in the country. What's all this about you here asking? Well over the last few months there have been an exuberant number of articles written about the poor state of the greenkeeping profession. It seems to me that, apparently, this poor state is due to interfering committees and lack of respect from the golfing public.

All the letters go on about wanting to produce wonderful courses and how committees change too often and don't have the right credentials for the work they do. And yet, we have an excellent attitudinal ambience and all sorts of comments of the same nature. I believe it is the attitude of these greenkeepers that brings problems on themselves and not the fault of the whole industry. As Duncan McGilvary pointed out in his article in the November issue of Greenkeeper international 90% of golf in Britain is played on private members golf courses. The very fact that they are only run by committees and have an excellent structure is a committee structure, and golf clubs have run like these for over 100 years. Part of being a Greenkeeper is working with committees and Chairman of the Greens Committee. All the greenkeepers should realise this is part of the job just as the same as top-dressing or applying fertiliser. Once this has been accepted a more harmonious relationship can be formed.

The committee structure is used widely in life, often known by another name, the government is a large structure of committees and sub committees. BIGGA's head office is in effect a committee structure, as are many golf clubs. The committees are the voice of the people, trying to run to the best of their ability whatever club, association or even country they are in charge of. If you will all know, committees never please all of the people all of the time as different people have different ideas and views on everything in life. Golf club committees try to provide what they feel the members want from their courses and they have to pass on or communicate these wants on to us the greenkeepers.

Is this the interference we hear so much about? I don't consider committee views as activities of the greens committee. It is part of the communication process, which is set up within committee run golf clubs. This is where I get back to supply and demand. We, as greenkeepers, are the suppliers of a product (the golf course) and in suppliers we should provide the product that is demanded by the golf club members.

If they want slow, bumpy greens that they can stop the ball on with a driver, never wanting them aerated because of those blasted holes that makes them miss so many puts, if they want fairway tees to be short, well the change is in the green committee at first sign of the illusive British sun, if they want rough so short they can rip a 3wood 120 yards and never lose the golf ball they bought in 1983 who are we?

We are not all producing top class championship courses for Tiger Woods and Co with long thick rough, narrow fairways and greens so fast the average club golfer would wet themselves! In this day and age where competition is fierce for new members at golf clubs it is the role of the greenkeepers to provide what the golfers want and ensure the future of the club. Supplying the desired product is where we use all the skills, knowledge and experience that we have, even if it is not what we consider to be a good course or aesthetically pleasing. The finished product should be made to the highest standard within the parameters set out by the clubs committees. We cannot change the establishment and golf club structure so we need to be more adaptable to our surroundings and the clubs needs and the golfers ever changing desires. Other members of the clubs management team e.g. the pro and secretary should be used by us to get information to and from the members. These people should be classed as allies, not the enemies as we all believe to be them. A pro or secretary with a little knowledge of greenkeeping can be a very handy partner on occasion even as hollister timing or course closure in the winter. These people may help in more on the front line of customer relations if they understand why, they can pass on the reasons to the golfers. Golf pros don't want to be greenkeepers in any more than we want to sit in a shop selling sweets and tee pegs all day, so we should not feel threatened if we are, as I'm sure we all are, competent at our jobs.

Most golfers know what they want from a golf course and they don't want to know how to achieve it. That's our job to educate and enlighten them as to the needs of the greens. We can see and the soils they can't. There are many ways to educate golfers. Open evenings, greens forums, a chat with Joe Smith on the 12 fairway. Use your imagination. The one thing we all feel most appropriate to the trainee and not the fault of the clubs management team e.g. the pro and golf club structure so we need to identify training needs and in turn motivate the greenkeepers to go forward, learn more and perhaps he should have a go at one of these. A quick example is if you go for an operation the surgeon will tell you in the simplest way what he is going to do, he will not mention how many yards of cotton he will use or how sharp the blade will be, because you do not need or want to know.

Happy Golfers = Less Moans = Happy Greenkeepers

Happy Greenkeepers

Help with lawn sand?

Has anybody experienced problems with turf damage to their greens following an application of lawn sand? We have unfortunately used lawn sand, as usual, only for it to later be found to be contaminated with herbicides and over a period of 1-6 weeks thereafter suffered severe disease symptoms on significant areas of our greens. We were able to prove that the lawn sand was the cause due to the fact that the one green that was not treated was the one that remained unaffected. We left the sand on the left over sealed unused bags which we have had tested at two independent laboratories for herbicide contaminations. If we had not had any left over nor had the one green that remained unaffected we would have been able to establish the cause, and certainly been able to prove it.

Should you have cause to now suspect that a routine application of lawn sand may have led to damage on your greens, contact the magazine with details of your club, the number printed on the bag. Should it be the same as that used by ourselves it may be of great help to you.

Please respond through the pages of this magazine.

Enviro thanks

Thank you for the excellent coverage (again) of this year's 2001 environmental competition and again we see the total commitment from numerous courses throughout the UK in promoting and enhancing environmental aspects. I would just like to point out a discrepancy in the article concerning my course, Bradley Park Golf Club. We have 300 members and no other than myself in charge of the course or to help your staff and customers with being municipal. The number of rounds per annum is between 55,000 and 60,000. Thank you again and here's to the future promotion of environmental concern on our courses.

D. W. Birley, Head Greenkeeper, Bradley Park Golf Club

In defence of National Vocational Qualifications

I recently read with dismay a letter in the Greenkeeper International from John Ross. His view was that the NVQ system was failing and yet another qualification should be produced to test our greenkeepers. Having worked my way through the City & Guilds to stage four, NVQ level and beyond I still believe that there is and always will be room for improvement and this should come in part from the Head Greenkeepers and not just the teaching bodies.

The GTC have established working groups that already review the training. The groups have representatives from colleges, STGA and BIGGA. It is through this partnership that the employers and greenkeepers can shape new qualifications to choose from that they feel most appropriate to the trainee and the club.

As I understand it, the NVQ system is all about making sure the person being trained can actually do the job on the ground as well as holding their own in a committee room when necessary.

I have lived all of the course where I am that NVQ's do work. I have only been here for 16 months and already have one of my staff well on the way to completing NVQ level two. This is a 37 year old man who had no ambition in the trade, he just used to come to work to do the job and then go home. He now knows botanical names for trees, grass and plants and can identify them as well. He now uses the correct tool for the job and not the one that he had but was not encouraged to employ.

For the critics that say it's all so easy, what would you expect if a person has been doing the job for 11 years? He should know how to do the job, he just needs to maintain the course. There are parts of the NVQ that need hard work and lots of it. What the NVQ system does is give them a chance to go forward, learn more and a recognised qualification on the way.

The other very important factor is that the Head Greenkeeper must put himself on the line and encourage the staff to ask questions. When a staff member goes through the NVQ system it will act as a refresher for all the staff (including the Head Greenkeeper). Questions that are asked in the ten noon can be thrown open to everyone. It is up to the Head Greenkeeper not to be frightened that he may not know the answer. There have been occasions when I have either forgotten the answer or have not known it. Nobody knows everything and we are all trying to improve are own in lot or another so let's share the real knowledge with each other that we get from our experience. I am not knocking the old system, but it is the real hands on knowledge that needs to be handed down along with the technical information from the text books and college.

As for the fact that John Ross seemed to find the NVQ easy, I have already stated a person doing the job should be able to do this. Level three is a stepping stone to level four and lack of theory, if any, should be dealt with at the appropriate levels. The governing bodies have put into place many other qualifications and perhaps he should have a go at one of them. At least then if any of his staff need his help he will be able to offer it. Some of the other points about the need for support for the loyal greenkeepers is in my opinion justified. However I believe that too much information is being given out to the club members on how the course is maintained. Greenkeepers all over the UK are measuring rain water and thatch levels etc. writing reports and putting their self under unnecessary pressure. It is time to get back to work, if they don't ask, then don't tell them. No where else is it more true that a little information in the wrong hands can be most dangerous. A quick example is if you go for an operation the surgeon will tell you in the simplest way what he is going to do, he will not mention how many yards of cotton he will use or how sharp the blade will be, because you do not need or want to know.

Use the report writing time to work on the course or to help your staff and remember stop talking before you run out of time to do your job. As for the course do the talking for you. My final message is to those Greenkeepers who have no yet received the training to become a work based trainer or even carried out an appraisal on their staff to identify training needs and in turn motivate that member of staff like my 37 year old! Get involved now, if you need help, it is out there for you, just ask.

T A Smith LCGI

North Shore Golf Club, Sedgefield

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