Response to Duncan McGilvray

When a greenkeeper of Duncan's (McGilvray) experience and status expresses concerns about the state of our profession it must be noted (See Greenkeeper International November issue page 9). Clearly from the tone of Duncan's letter he wishes to stimulate a debate - on that I wholly endorse him, I too feel that stagnancy has crept over us recently, and that the stature of our profession is diminishing.

I do not believe that our profession has become complacent. However I do think that our profession is struggling to cope with the golfer's expectations of year round perfection, that changing work patterns due to climatic change is exacerbating the problem and that a lack of support mechanisms for the Course Manager can leave him feeling isolated.

I believe that what our profession is suffering from is a crisis of confidence. A lack of confidence deriving from that feeling of isolation. At a time when the demands made of our golf courses are increasing. The Course Manager is too often left slogging it out with Committees, Boards, Golfers, and Secretaries in the pursuit of best practice.

The source of the demands is quite simply the constant drive for higher standards, and the need for clubs to generate revenue. Now that is a good thing, as professionals we should welcome it, yet realism demands that higher standards require resourcing, and nature insists that golf courses have to be prepared and the controversies with the demands of golfers requires an employer who is sympathetic to the situation. Sadly in too many golf clubs that is not the case. When that occurs the Course Manager's options are limited, and his job is often on the line. Let's not avoid this fact. We are talking about careers and livelihoods here.

If I have a concern with Duncan's letter is that it ignores the elements of our industry that can make greenkeeping a tenuous hold on a career. Unfortunately this is one thing that is necessary to remember when discussing this and it is this that must be at the core of any debate about the state of our profession.

Duncan's suggestion that some Course Managers are lacking in proactive and developer qualities must be valid, but the fact that he knows potentially pro-active managers who have abandoned the industry really does demand scrutiny. What is it about our industry that demoralises young enthusiasts, to the point that they will walk away? What is it about our industry that results in short-term reactive management?

Our profession is golf course management, our industry is Golf. We need to look at all the elements within the industry, the structures (the golfing authorities) the employers (the golf clubs), the decision-making processes (committees, boards of management), Golf course design and development, the education system and finally support mechanisms for the Course Manager. That means BIGGA. We have to analyse the extent to which these various elements impact our capacity to deliver a product. We have to consider whether the net sum of these elements means that golf courses suffer, and golf Course Managers are hindered.

The Way Forward by the R&A, for a period managed to pull these elements together. But it is inherent within our industry that change occurs. The constant turnover of club committees means BIGGA is always in the media. To do this we have to start at the top. The Golf Authorities are respected enough throughout the industry to have influence within individual clubs. They could impart this influence by issuing a code of conduct to clubs, or even club officials, controversial yes, but if it was dependant on affiliation it would be effective.

The golf clubs have to reconsider priorities, and accept that pro-active management commences in the committee room or boardroom. A return to the principles of "The Way Forward" in those clubs where it has lapsed, or an adoption of those principles where they never existed would be a positive step.

Golfers need educating, and every avenue has to be pursued in that goal. The Course Manager has to be active within his club, Golfing magazines should be persuaded to take up our cause, and TV commentators must be told to refrain from filling in time by commenting upon a subject that they know nothing about. For golfers take your word as gospel.

The education system needs an urgent review. I believe that the worst thing that has happened to our profession in my time has been the introduction of NVQ's. I speak from experience here because I have taken NVQ3 and C&G3). If knowledge is power, and power breeds confidence, then NVQ's are eroding the confidence of the greenkeeper. To make the step from greenkeeper to Course Manager you need to be furnished with more...
One of the biggest supporters of the Scottish golf industry has retired after 50 years career servicing, repairing and selling equipment to golf courses throughout Scotland.

At a special celebration at the headquarters of Scottish Grass Machinery George Brown received £200 golf vouchers.

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Are we stagnating?

than group assessments of simple tasks, and the barest of essentials on soil science and amenity horticulture. The lack of theory and scientific background in NVQ’s is simply disgraceful. We as a profession should not be accepting these as industry standards, and should be encouraging the educationalists to produce a qualification that is viable.

And finally BIGGA, we may well look back with pride, where it all started, how far we have come, but we must continue to strive forward. We must question whether the goals set up at creation have been attained, and whether those goals are still what the membership requires? Does the Association interact with clubs enough? Is the Association offering the support mechanisms the Course Manager needs? What input does the Association pursue in the items discussed above? I believe that BIGGA has a huge input to make in the representation of our profession, and that it must do so forcefully and with confidence.

Finally, having had my tuppence worth let me say that I am not pessimistic about our future. I see around me hungry young men, articulate, dedicated and keen to take up the baton. If the industry, and all those in it behaves responsibly then the future for them is bright and prosperous. However if the industry is irresponsible, then it is to those young men that they will eventually turn to for a solution. Ultimately, they cannot get by without us.

John Ross, Course Manager, Laleham GC, Chertsey

Thanks!

I would like to thank the Golden & Silver Key sponsors for supporting the Regional Training Programme. I attended the Risk Assessment and COSHH Awareness Course on 29 November at West Hill Golf Club. They offer excellent value for money and I would urge other greenkeepers to attend the training provided by BIGGA.

Stuart Hogg, Fortrose and Rosemarkie Golf Club

Editor: For further information on the latest Regional Training Courses on offer, see the Education and Training article overleaf on page 10

Address your letters to The Editor, Greenkeeper International, BIGGA HOUSE, Aldwark, Alne, York YO61 1UF, or email them to scott@bigga.co.uk

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