The One Over-riding Parameter

I was thinking recently that the content on your letters page was getting a bit thin on the ground; but when I saw Jim Arthur's controversial (as usual) letter get printed in December I knew the tide would soon turn!

It is always difficult to disagree with the principles behind what Jim has to say, and I have to say in his defence that the condition of my course has improved 100% since I read Practical Greenkeeping again and implemented most of Jim's back to basics ideas. I owe him a great deal of the praise I am currently getting for the condition of my greens.

However, it would be very easy for me to sit in my ivory tower, lord of a piece of ground tailor-made to make best use of his principles (perfect sandy rootzone, wall to wall fescues and bent - any encroachment of poa here is MY mistake -, and only around 12000 rounds a year), and criticise others less fortunate than myself. While I think Jim and all the people who responded to him make perfectly valid points, I think Jim underestimates one over-riding parameter by which we, as greenkeepers, can judge our successes in our "industrial" situations, which surely ends this long running feud once and for all.

"Do you, as a greenkeeper, maintain your course in the way it was originally intended by the architect to be maintained, and are you sympathetic to how much impact the way you look after your course has on the way your course plays? If the architect who designed your course, be it 110 years ago (as in Neil Ballingall's situation), returned to play it tomorrow, would he be pleased, or would he be disgusted?"

The reason I believe this point to be the crux of the argument is because, as Paul Copsey quite rightly points out, golf has become horses for courses. Not everyone enjoys playing on threadbare links courses, while many (myself included) are not big fans of parkland golf. I don't think this matters, but what does annoy me intensely is when a fine design is ruined by an unsympathetic greenkeeper who has no idea about the intricacies surrounding the design. My course is most fun when it plays as it was intended to play, i.e. hard and bouncy - and it would therefore be the cardinal sin for me to turn my greens to poa sponges. The challenge and subtleties would disappear, as they have on so many links. This is what has annoyed Jim Arthur all along.

But I don't know how Neil Ballingall or anyone else in his position can be criticised for maintaining their courses in the way they were designed either. After all, Bruce Devlin and Sam Torrance would have been fully well aware that the fairways and tees were going to be sown with ryegrass before they finalised their designs, and would have designed the subtleties around the grass. Neil should certainly be receiving nothing but praise for the condition of his very new greens, either: I haven't played the courses yet, but I did walk the Devlin and the surfaces looked tremendous.

Right, that was going to be my rant over, but seeing as it was you who opened this discussion for the benefit of the membership. The Association is and always will be a fantastic organisation. I am really honoured to accept the post of Chairman of the Northern Region for the next five years that I have served on the Board of Management. I have enjoyed my time immensely.

There have been many high points over the years. One of the most memorable is having our own Headquarters owned by the Association. If we could all just reflect on how far the Association has come since the formation of the three Associations joining, we are now accepted as equals with other professional bodies in the world of golf.

This is borne out by the Clubhouse Exhibition being held at Harrogate at the same time as our own Turf Management Exhibition. Education of greenkeepers is a high priority, and the GTC (Greenkeepers Training Committee) and Colleges has enhanced our credibility in the world of golf.

We can all be proud of the Association and its members. The Open Championship, the most prestigious Golf Tournament in the world where we have our support team, only enhances our standing in the world of golf.

On a low point, more and more greenkeepers through no fault of their own are having unrealistic targets placed upon them by unprofessional people who have got themselves into a position on golf club committees, who think they know better than the qualified and trained staff. Fortunately, these golf clubs are in the minority and most golf clubs take notice of their Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper. Unfortunately some do not. Sorry about my little whinge.

I pass my best wishes onto the staff at Headquarters who sometimes get criticised unnecessarily. The Board of Management and regional committees do an excellent job along with the section committees who are there for the sole purpose for the benefit of the membership. The Association is and always will be a membership run by Association.

May I wish everyone a happy and prosperous New Year and I wish Bert Cross and all the staff at Headquarters a happy Christmas, and I would like to thank the Northern Region for their support in the five years that I have served with them. I am really honoured to accept the post of Northern Region Chairman.

Ian Holoran, Middlesborough