

Be the best with the R&A

Steve Isaac, Assistant Director of Golf Course Management, discusses the important work of The R&A towards Best Practice.

Hopefully, you are all aware of our best practice guidelines website and, if you have not done so already, you will join the 500 or so clubs who have registered to www.bestcourseforgolf.org within three months of its launch.

Best practice is one of those phrases that gets into circulation without anyone really being able to define what it means. The same could be said of sustainability.

As The R&A website has the first in its title and the second as a regular theme throughout the guidance, it is necessary to explain what we mean when using these terms.

As far as we are concerned, the two terms have to be considered together. Both refer to economic and environmental attributes but these have to be put into the context of course management whose priority it is to produce quality playing surfaces.

We could get into a chicken and egg situation here. The implementation of best practice should ensure that golf clubs can be managed sustainably both in economic and environmental terms, whilst producing quality playing surfaces which golfers will want to return to time and again. Conversely, sustainable courses in economic and environmental terms will have to be managed to best practice.

There is a sliding scale to be considered. What can be afforded, and therefore economically sustainable, at one club may be considered unaffordable elsewhere. However, throwing money at a golf course will tend to go against best practice, especially when you apply the environmental criteria.

The R&A are not advocating course management on the cheap. We are not suggesting programmes of austerity if they cannot produce quality playing surfaces. However, we believe there are some basic universal principles of best practice which apply across the globe.

❑ Species selection and promotion. What grass species are most appropriate for the climate zone you are working in?

We are fortunate in the UK that our climate favours fine bent and fescue grasses which produce top quality playing surfaces in the most economically and environmentally sustainable manner.

Why have many courses lost these grasses from their greens over the last 30 years or so? The expectations of the golfer is clearly a major influence, with the demand for colour and speed resulting in the implementation of maintenance practices, such as very close mowing and increased fertiliser and water inputs, which favour *Poa annua*. But, we would argue, this response to golfer pressure cannot be considered sustainable, nor best practice.

❑ The use of the least amount of chemicals on the golf course.

Chemicals pollute and if we as an industry can work to minimise applications of fertiliser, pesticide and other chemical materials on the golf course we will be considered a sustainable user of land, which can only be for the good of the development of the game.

This may not be a great concern to clubs in the UK where golf is part of the social fabric, but in countries where golf is not an established game it can be critical to the chances of construction projects being approved.

❑ The use of the least amount of water.

Even in the UK this is becoming an issue, particularly in the southeast of England. Again, look further afield and water use is a serious consideration for planners in Mediterranean countries where water is scarce. Species selection is a key element in this regard as there are some warm-season grasses which use far less water than others, and other species that can take recycled or even saline water.

❑ Maintaining turf health through a management regime based on sound cultural practices.

If you put excessive stress on green turf through over close mowing or severe verticutting, which demands extra fertiliser and water to achieve recovery, which then requires extra top dressings to check thatch, then you are into unsustainable territory.



▲ Fine fescue dominated swards, clockwise from top left, in Slovakia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Scotland.



❑ **Dealing with environmental influences over which you have some control that cause deterioration in sward quality.**

The most obvious is shade resulting in a lack of sunlight or air movement to greens.

We have spent decades researching turf grasses best suited to the production of a putting surface. Yet, how many greens throughout the world retain the grasses they were established with?

Poa annua ingress may be difficult to contend with, ever more so if golfer expectation and maintenance encourage this species at the expense of more desirable grasses. However, Poa annua domination of a green is never a forgone conclusion.

There are plenty of good sources of advice and examples of how to grow in and maintain quality greens that remain dominated by the grasses they were established with. There are, however, far more of those that have seen the battle against Poa annua lost.

Some accept this as the way it must be, others try to reverse the trend which always takes far longer to achieve than the initial deterioration. Few should be surprised that the good soil husbandry and sound turf management required to restore desirable species also produces healthier Poa annua, unless taken to extremes, and a reduction in economic and environmental cost.

We can all list circumstances which can encourage Poa annua, such as shade, excess fertiliser, over watering, overly close mowing, too much traffic and too little aeration – but all of these can be addressed if all those individuals involved in management decisions are committed to promoting the desirable grasses.

Unfortunately, few imparting pressure for “green” greens or fast surfaces appreciate the consequences of the relentless chase of their ambition. Traditional, or common-sense, greenkeeping must come back into favour as the demands of the environment and commercial interest bite.

It is unfortunate that golf has to react to environmental legislation and a downturn in the golf economy, rather than embracing sound land management techniques which have been with us for over 100 years.

However, any historian of course management in the UK will tell you



◀ **Problems with species composition and resultant stress, be it drought or shade related, can be resolved if the cause is identified and dealt with.**

that greenkeeping is a story of trends, moving from one extreme to another, i.e. the farmer-led yield lobby to the starvation diet. Circumstance now dictates we base course management to the leaner end of this spectrum.

The term sustainable suggests a temporal dimension, i.e. it is time limited. We would suggest that any new green which retains a sward dominated by the grasses it was sown with 5 years after establishment has achieved a sustainable level.

This does not, necessarily mean a sward comprising 100% sown grasses, but one that retains at least 60% sown species could be considered a benchmark.

Although we accept there will be fluctuations in sward composition over the years, deterioration to a sward with higher maintenance demands goes against the principle of sustainability, both in terms of environmental and economic thresholds.

Best practice is any management programme which attains a sustainable sward and then continues to retain it over the long term.

Education is the key to future success in achieving economically and environmentally sustainable golf courses through best practice.

Those doubters in the greenkeeping profession have to be shown examples of where it works, and not just on links or dry heathland courses which are the natural homes to bent and fescue grasses, but on inland courses where it can be more of a power struggle.

Those educating the course managers of tomorrow have to realise that “traditional” values in greenkeeping are not a retrograde step, ignoring advances in technology, but complete compatibility with that technology is essential to the long term future of the game.

Most importantly, golfers have to be educated to appreciate the beauty and subtlety of shades of green and brown, the skill required to play firm greens and the benefit of promoting sustainable courses.

This will give them more value for their subscription, greater spending power for their club, enable golf to coexist better with the wider environment and produce more good quality courses.

Over the coming years, you will regularly hear from The R&A. We will update you on progress with the website, with examples of best practice in action – seeing is believing – and of the results of research that have practical application.

We are committed to best practice and management of courses that is environmentally and economically sustainable. We are also committed to the production of golf courses which have playing surfaces of a high standard for as much of the year as the climate will allow. We are convinced these are attainable and not mutually exclusive. Join us in achieving these goals.

Register your club to www.bestcourseforgolf.org today. Further details on The R&A's Course Management Best Practice Guidelines website and other aspects of the Golf Course Committee's work can be obtained from:

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