Question time

We teamed up with Today’s Golfer magazine to discover BIGGA members’ opinions of golfers – the first ever such survey of the nation’s greenkeepers. Read on for the thought-provoking responses.

The majority of greenkeepers communicate with members... 74% of golfers directly blame greenkeepers if the course is below expectations... almost half of golfers repair pitch marks badly... These are just some of the fascinating findings after Today’s Golfer surveyed BIGGA members recently, and published the results in their latest issue.

Today’s Golfer acknowledged that golfers are quick to criticise when they feel elements of the course are unsatisfactory, but slow to praise greenkeepers when the course looks good and plays great. So they contacted us and together we came up with the survey. Its aim was to help golfers across the UK understand in more detail the skill and hard work that enables them to play on well maintained courses and show greater appreciation of the huge amount of work that goes into maintaining a golf course.

Thanks to the BIGGA members who responded – the results were very interesting – and all responses will remain anonymous. Today’s Golfer enjoys a large readership and BIGGA hopes that this survey will not only raise the profile of greenkeeping but educate golfers on the intricacies of the industry.

It’s clear that communication and education are the key words when it comes to increasing the respect golfers have for greenkeepers, and a lack of understanding of a greenkeepers’ role is a real bugbear. On a lighter note, some of the respondents revealed some hilarious and bizarre tales of strange behaviour from golfers – from a player being under the misapprehension that the greenkeepers’ role is a real bugbear. On a lighter note, some of the respondents revealed some hilarious and bizarre tales of strange behaviour from golfers – from a player being under the misapprehension of what is required to maintain good playing qualities and a small proportion of golfers who do not respect them and question their abilities. More and more golfers have started to view greenkeepers as professionals in the last five years, but, according to the men themselves, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

The majority of greenkeepers feel they are respected by most of their club’s members, but this can be undermined by a lack of understanding of what is required to maintain good playing qualities and a small proportion of golfers who do not respect them and question their abilities. More and more golfers have started to view greenkeepers as professionals in the last five years, but, according to the men themselves, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

There definitely is a mixed perception of greenkeepers by golfers. There are those who can appreciate the difficulties in maintaining year-round quality surfaces, and then there are those who expect to play a well-maintained course whenever they want, whatever the weather with no disruption to play from greenkeeping practices. The latter tend to view the greenkeeper as the enemy and see any course closures as his fault. Unfortunately, they can often be the more vocal.

We have a good relationship with our members but it has to be worked at; communication at all times with them is the key to a good relationship.
The vast majority of greenkeepers communicate with members... 74% of golfers directly blame greenkeepers if the course is below expectations... almost half if the course is below par. Greenkeepers...74% of golfers see a player do/say? for more.

**Survey**

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**How do you feel you are perceived by golfers?**

There definitely is a mixed perception of greenkeepers by golfers. There are those who can appreciate the difficulties in maintaining year-round quality surfaces, and then there are those who expect to play a well-maintained course wherever they want, whatever the weather with no disruption to play from greenkeeping practices. The latter tend to view the greenkeeper as the enemy and see any course closures as his fault. Unfortunately, they can often be the more vocal.

“As people who just mow grass and cut down trees, there is no understanding of what and why we do work, but I ask them: ‘What would happen to their garden if they walked up and down it 200 times a day?’”

There are those who can appreciate the difficulties in maintaining year-round quality surfaces, and then there are those who expect to play a well-maintained course wherever they want, whatever the weather, with no disruption to play from greenkeeping practices. The latter tend to view the greenkeeper as the enemy and see any course closures as his fault. Unfortunately, they can often be the more vocal.

“I think they view us as very important in the overall running of the golf club. They realise that without us there would not be a course for them to play on. They also think sometimes that we do things to annoy them (aerate, top dress etc) but in reality these tasks are essential and the majority of the membership totally understand the actions we take. We have a good relationship with our members but it has to be worked at; communication at all times with them is the key to a good relationship.”

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**How many hours a week do you work in the summer?**

- 45-49 35%
- 40-44 27%
- 50-54 21%
- 55-59 11%
- More than 60 4%

**What time do you start work on a typical summer’s day?**

- 6am 37%
- 5.30am 10%
- 6.30am 14%
- 7am 17%
- 7.30am 14%
- Before 6am 8%
- 6.30am 14%
- After 7.30am 3%
- 7.30am 10%

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**What level of interaction do you have with club golfers?**

- Newsletter 42%
- Member meetings 40%
- Course walks 17%
- Blogs 13%

The vast majority of greenkeepers are attempting to interact and communicate with their members, but many feel their voice isn’t always heard. This is a two-way street, so look out for ways to learn more about course maintenance and don’t be afraid to ask your greenkeepers questions. They know what they’re talking about and will always be willing to help.

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Survey reproduced in full, courtesy of Today’s Golfer.
How well do golfers repair pitch marks at your facility?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Badly</th>
<th>Average</th>
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<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<td>Very badly</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Well 4%</td>
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Greenkeepers believe fewer than half golfers repair pitch marks to an adequate standard. Make sure you always have a pitch mark repairer in your pocket when on the course and ask the pro or greenkeeper if you need guidance on how to properly use it. And remember, just because your ball finished off the green, it doesn’t mean it didn’t land on it.

What are the most overlooked aspects of course care?

There are a wide range of areas that greenkeepers feel are overlooked by golfers, from simple things like properly replacing divots and repairing pitch marks, to things like winter maintenance, machinery maintenance and biological and ecological knowledge. It’s obvious that the majority of greenkeepers would be over the moon if all golfers did the simple things like replace their divots, repair their pitch marks and rake bunkers properly when leaving them.

Drainage. This includes installing and maintaining. When a course floods members are up in arms but when the flooding stops few committees will spend the right amount of money, the excuse being that it does not happen very often and it is a lot of money. If the committee shows no interest in drainage, staff impact and enthusiasm will be minimal as it can be a very dirty difficult job.

Pitch marks and fairway divots. After that it would be lack of care in bunker repair after use.

Members are completely unaware of the work that goes on behind the scenes to maintain a golf course. The high profile work such as mowing and top dressing they see every day but they have no knowledge of the skills required in other areas. For instance, machinery grinding and servicing requires a good deal of training and skill yet some players still believe that winter work involves us playing cards.

How friendly are golfers when you come into contact with them?

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<tr>
<th>Friendly</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Very friendly</th>
<th>Very unfriendly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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Greenkeepers may not think golfers fully understand their role and do as much to help as we could, but they certainly think we are a friendly bunch. Not one greenkeeper taking the survey said golfers were unfriendly so let’s maintain that by chatting with greenkeepers when we see them.
How good are golfers at putting divots back?

- Average 58%
- Bad 29%
- Good 12%
- Very bad 4%
- Very good 3%

It seems we're a bit better at replacing divots than repairing pitch marks, but with 29 per cent of golfers still below the required standard there is plenty of room for improvement. It only takes a few seconds to replace a divot or fill one with sand (if it has been removed). It also goes a long way to improving the look and playability of your golf course and can save the greenkeepers valuable time that could be spent repairing or improving other areas of the course.

DO GOLFERS DIRECTLY BLAME YOU IF THEY FEEL THE COURSE HAS NOT MET THEIR EXPECTATIONS?

Yes 74% No 26%

It’s right and understandable that greenkeepers are held to account for course condition, but they can’t control the weather and many face decreasing budgets. These factors have to be taken into account when assessing how good a job is being done. After the wettest summer in 100 years and a horrible winter, it’s likely your garden probably isn’t looking its best, especially if you’re spending less on it. Golfers are fighting the same problems, but on a far larger scale.

How well do golfers repair pitch marks at your facility?

- Badly 45%
- Average 39%
- Very badly 12%
- Well 4%
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WHAT ARE THE MOST OVERLOOKED ASPECTS OF COURSE CARE?

There are a wide range of areas that greenkeepers feel are overlooked by golfers, from simple things like properly replacing divots and repairing pitch marks, to things the golfer may not even see such as drainage, machinery maintenance and biological and ecological knowledge. It’s obvious that the majority of greenkeepers would be over the moon if all golfers did the simple things like replace their divots, repair their pitch marks and rake bunkers properly when leaving them.

- Drainage. This includes installing and maintaining. When a course floods members are up in arms but when the flooding stops few committees will spend the right amount of money, the excuse being that it does not happen very often and it is a lot of money. If the committee shows no interest in drainage, staff impact and enthusiasm will be minimal as it can be a very dirty difficult job.

- Pitch marks and fairway divots. After that it would be lack of care in bunker repair after use.

- Members are completely unaware of the work that goes on behind the scenes to maintain a golf course. The high profile work such as mowing and top dressing they see every day but they have no knowledge of the skills required in other areas. For instance, machinery grinding and servicing requires a good deal of training and skill yet some players still believe that winter work involves us playing cards.

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- Average 21%
- Very friendly 20%
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FORE!

GENERALLY, DO PEOPLE WAIT TO HIT INTO A GREEN YOU’RE WORKING ON?

Usually 78% Rarely 14% Always 7% Never 1%

The majority of golfers wait for greenkeepers to clear the green but with 15 per cent experiencing this issue on occasion some players still need to think about that. No one should have to worry about being hit by a golf ball on the course, whether working or playing. Just think about how angry you get when you’re nearly hit by a ball.
RESPECT

What could be done to increase the respect golfers have for greenkeepers?

It’s clear that the key here is communication and education as this was mentioned in virtually every response. Greenkeepers believe that if golfers know more about what they are doing and why, we would understand the challenges they face and passion and pride they have for producing the best course possible. Ask your greenkeepers what they do. They’d appreciate you taking an interest and you’d benefit from the added knowledge.

“The chance to explain why we do what we do. The club has a plan based on the amount of money we have to spend every year. When golfers watch golf on TV they have no idea how much money and back up that event has had, so they want the same but don’t want to pay for it.”

“Keep communicating with them. Maybe a documentary on the BBC after The Open showing how they prepare the course, and put across the fact that not all clubs have the budgets and staff that top courses do.”

“Make them do a day’s work on the course where they are a member.”

“Greenkeepers need to be more professional. The old school approach is not one that has helped our image. We must educate members that cutting the grass is the tip of the iceberg and the skillful part of the job is often not seen or recognised.”

“The standard of general course care and maintenance is clearly a big annoyance for greenkeepers but there are a few other things that drive them crazy too. Taking trolleys and buggies onto tees and too close to greens, leaving litter on the course, ignoring signs, failure to observe health and safety and general moaning all feature prominently in the survey answers.

“Having a moan to the green staff about a subject that is being carried out by direction of the club, which they would have received emails and notices about. When golfers try and bully greenkeepers to change what they are doing for the good of the club.”

“Playing from the back tees when not playing in a competition.”

“Taking trolleys and buggies too close to greens and generally not caring for the course.”

“When golfers don’t accept that the course is shut for reasons beyond our control. For example, waterlogged, frozen or snow. We do not do it for our own gratification, it’s necessary. It would be far easier just to open it than to have to tell several upset golfers that it’s closed, but it’s about the bigger picture.”

“Most golfers want a Rolls Royce, but only want to pay for a Skoda.”

What’s your pet hate about club golfers?

How good are golfers at raking bunkers at your facility?

Bad 42% Average 38% Very bad 14% Good 6% Very good 0%

More than half of us don’t maintain bunkers to the required standard. Having to play from an unraked bunker is one of the most frustrating things in golf and it only takes a minute doesn’t affect play and can be easily found by other players, and ask your pro or greenkeepers if you’re not sure about how to properly rake a bunker.

What’s the best conditioned course you’ve seen in the UK?

More than 40 courses were named in the survey with championship venues and links courses understandably taking the majority of the votes. It seems Scotland has the best greens with Carnoustie, Royal Aberdeen and Loch Lomond leading the standings with six votes each and Turnberry with four. The top English course was Wentworth (four votes) and The Belfry at The Belfry, Royal Porthcawl, St Andrews, Sunningdale, The Grove and Hankley Common natching three.

What’s the funniest/weirdest thing you’ve seen a player do/say?

“A golfer once asked if we spray the stripes on the green.”

“We were once asked to remove four new signs from around the putting greens which read no chipping onto putting greens because they didn’t say ‘please’.”

“A member with an injured leg playing a round of golf on a bicycle.”

“I saw a golfer take a trolley into the bunker and then rake the footprints, but not rake the wheel marks once it’s closed, but it’s about the bigger picture.”

“I thought I was upset that he didn’t rake out the wheel marks, not that he had the trolley in the bunker.”

“A lady golfer at a local club was seen hitting her ball from the turf when fairway mats were in operation (she had been given a mat by the pro shop). The greenkeeper approached and said she must use the mat supplied. He then observed as the lady stood precariously on the mat and hit her next shot off the fairway. You couldn’t make it up!”

“Two ladies taking their tops off and running through the sprinklers on the green on a hot day (and I have the photo to prove it!”

“Once when I was fertilising the tees I heard one golfer ask their playing partner what we were doing. The partner replied, ‘they’re feeding the birds, that’s why we have robins.’”

What do you do to help educate your members on your role and the challenges you face?

Every greenkeeper who took the survey is making efforts to communicate with their club members, improve knowledge of what they do and keep golfers updated on the course. It’s our responsibility to make the most of these opportunities so we can understand their role and take better care of courses ourselves.

“We have monthly members meetings in the clubhouse, a YouTube channel and members can email us and arrange a meeting. We use the bar so it’s informal.”

“What could be done to increase the respect golfers have for greenkeepers? It’s clear that the key here is communication and education as this was mentioned in virtually every response. Greenkeepers believe that if golfers know more about what they are doing and why, we would understand the challenges they face and passion and pride they have for producing the best course possible. Ask your greenkeepers what they do. They’d appreciate you taking an interest and you’d benefit from the added knowledge.

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What’s the funniest/weirdest thing you’ve seen a player do/say?

A golfer hit a train and then told the driver that he would not have hit it if the train was on time. And someone once mistook a mushroom for the tip of his ball. It exploded into bits when he hit it.

A golfer hit two balls into a pot off the 1st tee, then threw his clubs and bag into the pot in frustration. He returned 10 minutes later to retrieve his bag and collect his car keys from inside, before throwing the bag straight back into the pot!

The funniest thing I’ve seen was a golfer knocking his tee shot into a bin that was level with the markers. It was a highly impressive two-yard straight right flip shot with a driver and it went in without touching the sides.

There was someone who was trying to show off with his remote control trolley and he put it in a pond.

A golfer walking down a fairway with his pants down because his drive didn’t make it past the ladies’ tee.

“A golfer once asked if we spray the stripes on the green.”

“A woman with an injured leg playing a round of golf on a bicycle.”

“A golfer once asked if we remove four new signs from around the putting greens which read no chipping onto putting greens because they didn’t say ‘please.’”

“Is there anything you can spray to get rid of the flies around the 2nd tee?”

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