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Chairman's Column

The Work Never Ends

The arrival of March marks the end of winter in our calendar and brings a surge in play as visitors take advantage of the last month of reduced winter green fees. Tee times start earlier with the lengthening daylight and our work hours follow suit.

Each winter we always seem to take on more project work in-house and aim to complete all of these before play levels pick up again in the spring. Over the past month the weather has thrown us snow and heavy rain to slow our progress leaving few dry spells to allow ground conditions to firm up and crack on with the work.

Three new championship tees, re-shaping two approaches and remodeling a par-3 greenside bunker complex were all on the in-house project list this winter.

Renovating some of the bunkers each year is also essential with having almost 200 in total, it is a bit like painting the Forth Bridge, just getting finished and then having to start all over again.

In addition, installation of a new electrical control system to the pumphouse and a drainage project to prevent flooding from a nearby road onto the course were joint projects, with us working in conjunction with contractors.

Just as we were planning to wrap up all our project work, tidy up and prepare for the season a last minute requirement has been thrown in our direction, another project! Let's just hope for some dry weather.

Along with many others it's that time of year for us when budgets are being drafted, for both operating costs and capital expenditure. The whole budgeting process from calculation through to submission, discussions, negotiations etc can often be viewed by many with some apprehension, particularly at this stage in the economic cycle. Over recent months this subject has become a hot topic of conversation and is likely to remain so.

After the staff, the golf course is the biggest asset for any club to manage and is the primary reason to attract customers. Golfers can buy a meal and drink at many other places but it is the course itself that counts most. Having a drink in a newly refurbished bar will not cut the mustard with golfers if they have just walked off a poorly presented course which has clearly had no similar investment. When it comes down to priorities the course condition is paramount to retain existing customers and attract new business. We need to get that message across loud and clear to those responsible for making budgetary decisions in our clubs.

In order to put ourselves in the strongest position to discuss, recommend and negotiate the budget, a good starting point is to draw up a work plan for the year. Whether it is how many bunkers we expect to renovate, or how many topdressings on greens, the quantities of sand to be applied are estimated. Once these numbers are to hand and the costs calculated attached to them, it makes for a much more transparent set of figures.

Then when it comes down to discussing the budget it is much easier to substantiate the figures with the quantities of material quantities and work plan to hand and directly related. If you are asked to reduce costs it is quite straightforward to show your workings and then ask which work operation are you not required to do? Deciding which items are the priorities becomes much easier when asked to find savings and armed with the facts and figures ensures you are more in control.

In order to budget accurately it is essential to have up to date survey information of the sizes of all the golf course features maintained. Over



the winter period our course has been re-surveyed to bring old plans up to date. It had last been done in 1998 and over the ten years since, many alterations to grass lines, fairway widths etc had changed. The plans show the dimensions of all areas including lakes, cartpaths, bunkers etc and take all the guesswork out of making budget calculations. When it comes to contracting out work, accurate measurements also make it much easier to discuss rates per hectare of areas with some certainty of the likely cost. Most courses are already surveyed to enable a course guide to be produced so the additional work of surveying and presenting the information that the greenkeeping department require can be obtained at a nominal cost.

During Harrogate Week I sat in on the benchmarking seminar presented by the R&A and could see the benefit of having accurate survey information to this project. Steve Isaac talked about the need to record more facts and figures about your course maintenance such as quantities of irrigation, fertiliser and pesticide applied. Increasingly bodies such as The Environment Agency and the European Union look ever more closely at our industry and we need to be ready with accurate information to provide specifics and not allow generalities to shape legislation and restrictions on us doing our job. A few years ago I came across a document that set down irrigation quantity requirements for a typical 18 hole course with no variance for courses with different soil types, grass species, situations etc. The organization concerned were using the document as their reference point and it bore little relevance to individual courses up and down the country. It is only by us having accurate records that we can challenge incorrect assumptions and protect our industry from ill thought out legislation in the future.

Peter Todd
Chairman

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