



John P. Shildrick

“Standard” is a familiar word that most of us hear and use frequently without worrying too much about its exact meaning in every situation.

Players expect a golf course, its greens and fairways, to be prepared “to a high standard”, but would probably find it difficult to explain what they mean by high standards. Most likely a combination of attractive appearance and consistency from green to green, coloured by whether or not successful personal scores are being achieved. These perceptions are not really standards: more, just personal preferences, their own or others.

Many greenkeepers think of “standards” in terms of different heights of cut for ordinary weekends and for tournaments, or the gradation of different heights and mowing frequencies for fairways, semi-rough and rough. In other words, standards are what is done, when, how often, at what height of cut, or with what scarifier setting. These are still not really standards; but descriptions, or specifications, of workmanship.

Green Speed

Most greenkeepers also have their own ways of assessing the results of workmanship, by personal tests they learnt as apprentices or have developed over the years: rolling or dropping a ball, pressing their heels on the turf, even just playing a round on the course from time to time. Some will make use of more objective tests; measuring the thatch when the hole is changed, or using the Stimpmeter — that simple grooved stick down which the ball rolls when a certain angle is reached, so that distance rolled is a measure of “green speed”. Here at last one can really begin to talk of standards: from these various tests of playing quality, subjective or objective, standards can be decided and checked.

Subjective tests are fine while the same man applies them, trusted in his judgement and able to decide from year to year whether or not the greens are fit for the big event. But what happens when he leaves, or is ill, or has

“Playing Quality Standards” What do we mean?

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an argument with the Green Committee or the visiting adviser? That is when the objective test — the regularly measured thatch thicknesses, the Stimpmeter readings, have their value. They must not be used blindly, or to the exclusion of other criteria.

There is no substitute for methodically recorded measurements and the wise greenkeeper has some record of the test results: he has recorded his own standards of playing quality and — better still — made notes of what he did to achieve them.

Guidelines?

Other people concerned with golf courses mean something different again by “standards”. The constructors and installers of equipment may have their own personal “standards” to work to, or may work to Association ones. These may be general rules of good working practice; or points of procedure such as providing the client with clear maps of work done. Some confusion might be avoided if, in this context, the term “standards” could be replaced by something like “codes of good practice” or “guidelines.”

In a slightly different sense again, these contractors or installers may be using equipment or parts which conform to BS this or that: in other words, a “British Standard” defines, perhaps in considerable detail, the quality and dimensions and fitness for purpose of specific materials.

Finally, the British Standards Institution is now about to publish British Standard Recommendations for Grounds Maintenance which cover many of the different aspects of the definition and assessment of quality already reviewed; but the numerical criteria that most of us would call “standards of turf quality” have to be called “maintenance objectives” to avoid confusion with the word “standard” as in “British Standard”! Confirmation indeed that the word has been overworked!

Nevertheless, there is much talk of standards nowadays in all kinds of amenity turf situations, and progress really does require everyone to mean the same thing when any particular word is used.

Clear terms

In February the NTC held a Workshop dealing mainly with standards for football pitches, this is slightly different from the situation on the golf course but Peter Dury, one of the speakers, emphasized the importance of using terms clearly. He described his own authority’s three-part documentation:

1. Standards.
2. Specification.

3. Code of practice.

First, standards. These, principally standards of playing quality, identify what is wanted by players or users. In football these can be measured, and figures specified to define the required standard. For golf there is not yet quite the same framework of measured data, but there are for instance guideline figures for the Stimpmeter. In addition, research work at STRI is now giving a picture of what values to expect for ball bounce or surface hardness on a golf green.

Second, specification. This indicates what the client requires the contractor to achieve, and define the standards required on any particular turf area.

Third, “code of practice”. In Peter Dury’s case this means a document setting out good practices for certain operations (with chemicals or equipment, for example). In working with these the contractor would be expected to follow the code — although in more routine operations he could use his own judgement on how to achieve the specified standards.

The yardstick

This is just one example of how standards for the greenkeeper are not abstractions, but the yardsticks by which the success of daily work is measured and by which decisions on repeat treatments or change of treatment are made.

Likewise, these standards of playing quality will be the ultimate test of whether construction, drainage or irrigation installation has been successfully undertaken. The contractor or installer will have a code of good practice, or whatever it is called, making clear the depth of pipes, the acceptable uniformity of rootzone mixtures, the type and BS number of pipe to be used, and so on. He will work according to the specification, in the customary sense of the prescription laid down by the architect, consultant or other specialist. But in the last resort, the specification itself and the workmanship that went into achieving it, will be judged against standards of playing quality.

Standards cannot be developed until suitable test methods have been worked out. And standards cannot be achieved consistently until the relevant operations and their frequencies have been identified — in mowing, irrigating, fertilizing, aerating, and so on. Draining a football pitch for instance is not easy, but it is simpler in theory and practice than adjusting the ball characteristics of 18 different greens by the right combination of fertilizer, irrigation, thatch control and mowing. But even this will come.