

# SPRING TURF MAINTENANCE

*Jack McMillan is relinquishing his position as head greenkeeper at Sunningdale Golf Club at the end of this month to become the first greenkeeper/consultant employed by the International Golfers Club/BIGGA.*

## THE CHANGING FACE OF GREENKEEPING IN BRITAIN

**T**HE game of golf is currently enjoying an all-time high in terms of the number of people participating in the game.

However, spare a thought for the person who has to maintain and prepare the golf course. Increase in play has put new demands on both maintenance and management programmes. It was only a few years ago that the average number of rounds per annum was 5,000, now it is nearer 50,000. This is without question the major cause of concern facing greenkeepers as we move into a new decade.

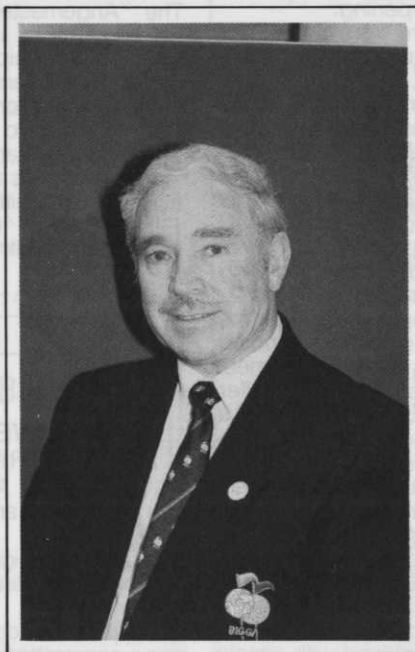
Much of this traffic occurs during dormant winter conditions, and there is increasing pressure to keep courses open irrespective of weather conditions or the amount of golf played during bad weather. Greenkeepers today, not from choice but from pressure accept golf in weather conditions where previously courses would have been closed. Anyone who tells us that we do no harm with prolonged heavy traffic during frost on courses with a short growing season and year round golf has no experience of looking after a golf course. They should talk to the greenkeepers who are at the sharp end and who have to prepare courses for major events early in the season.

Courses are now being used as a source of revenue more than at any time in the history of the game. This applies to the private members club, the corporate set up, the family business, the local authorities and the hotel groups. I do not at this time see this situation changing, again due to the increased popularity of the game.

This has had a detrimental effect on the conditions of greens. Any deterioration in the condition of greens in the UK at the present time is due primarily for two reasons - bad construction and being overplayed.

Most of the older courses in this country have been constructed using local materials sometimes poor impervious clays. It is significant that the more successful ones are on the sands of the links, the heaths, the Brecklands and the chalk downlands, all in their own way with little or no real drainage requirement. It is also a fact that the sandy structures require less aeration than the heavier materials found inland.

Few if any of the older courses have a drainage system. Where systems have been installed at a later date they were afterthoughts and in the main have been a poor remedial exercise. Many of the old greens were constructed to retain water during periods of drought, a dew pond system being used. This called for a layer



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of clay to retain much of the surface water. Modern construction allows for both an excellent drainage system and drainage raft.

On the heavy clay inland courses, the problems of managing the great increase in the popularity of the game, resulting in a more intensive playing programme have been enormous. Many years ago in an article in Bernard Darwin's time the advice was given not to play on the heavy London courses in winter or the burned up links in summer. It would seem contrary to what we hear that today's problems may have been going on even then.

At best, the grass cover variety wise that most greenkeepers in Britain can hope to manage successfully at this time is a mix of bent and annual meadow grass. As the traffic increases and the frequency of mowing and lower heights of cut become the norm, fescue disappears and is replaced with meadow grass. This is the experience in practice. Any evidence of fescue found is on the links and sometimes the policies applied to achieve this become totally unacceptable, ie burning off of meadow grass by stress-

ing in drought. On busy courses a total of two wet years will normally return this situation to meadow grass and the continuing struggle to win back some fescue.

The real cause for conflict between the greenkeeper and his members is that the poorly constructed greens require a level of aeration to keep them alive that offends the member who feels that the management programme is weighted against him. There is no softer, easier way, most of the courses in this country today are doomed to the heavy intensive aeration programmes they are receiving. If someone somewhere knows of another way of keeping badly constructed golf greens alive under heavy traffic would he please let all the greenkeepers in this country know.

Any greenkeeper experiencing difficulty at his club over the level of aeration he is applying should make it clear that as long as his course is expected to take heavy traffic, he will have to continue with the regular aeration programme. He can with no guilt tell his club that it is not a greenkeeping or an aeration problem but a poorly constructed green problem.

We do today have available to us methods of constructing more modern greens, with a rootzone material that will survive with a fraction of the aeration we currently apply. This material is not plucked out of the air in percentage mixes but is put together in a laboratory, to a suitable bulk density, porosity and ability to retain moisture.

It is only fair to warn any interested parties that this is not the cheapest method of construction but in the considered opinion of many experts is the only way forward. The USGA would go as far as to say it will last under heavy play for 100 years or more. When constructed a USGA Greens Section Specification will be slightly more costly in day to day management. There is no such thing as a modified USGA Greens Section Specification.

I am not at this time advocating that every green in this country should be torn up and replaced with a first class specification, the cost of such an exercise would be immense. I am however saying to golfing members get off your greenkeeper's back. He is at this time applying policies in your best interest not from choice but from necessity. No greenkeeper takes any pleasure in the intensive aeration, the regular top-dressing programmes, the sensible use of water programmes. He is, in fact, applying these same programmes in the best interests of the golf course.

Might I suggest that every club choose a green and apply the programme the membership would like - no aeration, no top-dressing, plenty of water in drought, plant cover scoured off to find pace and bags of fertiliser to make it green. This green could be called the members green. By the end of this year we would have one green in every club that would be a disaster area. Hopefully then members might just appreciate what their greenkeepers do for them. I am fed up listening to young greenkeepers who are being given a life of hell for doing a good job.

**JACK McMILLAN**