

The state of the profession

by Jack McMillan
incoming chairman of the

British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association

EVERY season brings with it some controversial talking point, the present one being greenspeed or pace.

Greenkeepers are still receiving flak from all and sundry about the deterioration of the quality of the greens provided for the golfer, when the golfing press, professional golfers and the club golfer express concern.

Now might just be a good time to have a good look at ourselves, where we have been, where we are at present and where we hope to be in the future. Greenkeepers have never been unanimous in the past regarding greenkeeping philosophy. Hopefully, the news of the R & A's investment into researching this subject at the STRI might someday have us all working along similar lines, towards a common end - better greens!

The types of course we play on in this country are many and varied and there are times, throughout the year, when they cannot be compared one to the other. Links, downs, heath and heavy clay parks all react differently to the vagaries of prolonged drought or long wet spells. Golfing press, kindly take note!

We have also come in for some criticism from tour professionals lately. Professionals, week in week out, are privileged to play at venues where every effort has been made to give them the fastest and best surfaces that can be achieved without causing any long-term damage. From some of the comments we read it would seem that pace or greenspeed is the main point of contention.

To achieve the top level of greenspeed for tournament golf, our programme closely follows that of the Americans. Nitrogen fertilisers used sparingly, regular use of verticut reels and an intensive top-dressing programme. It is also

a fact of life that the best possible speeds are reached during periods of drought, when the greenkeeper can dictate the amount of water used. If God in his wisdom sends us prolonged periods of wet weather, this has a profound effect on the pace.

I personally believe that the amount of water from the heavens or from irrigation determines the pace more than anything else. Unfortunately when clubs have invested a great deal of money in very sophisticated irrigation equipment they bring pressure to bear on the greenkeeper to use or "missuse" it, although it should be mentioned at this point that research in the United States would seem to discount that moisture content has any real slowing effect on pace. My own experience differs from this.

The height of cut has been dropped and greens are double cut and sometimes rolled to get the best possible speed. Ask any greenkeeper who has applied this programme and they will tell you that they could see their greens deteriorate before their eyes. This experience has been shared with superintendents

in the United States.

I am sure the plant breeders would agree that very few varieties can withstand this treatment for any length of time, even poa annua becomes sickly and weak. In the USA they have budget levels and in most cases soil temperatures suitable for aiding recovery from overseeding programmes, to quickly restore putting surfaces to normal. Our usual growing season at best lasts four or five months.

The only way to achieve a measure of recovery from this fairly dramatic treatment is to raise the height of cut to a sensible 3/16th of an inch as soon as possible after the tournament. This can, understandably, cause some resentment from club members who may, with some justification, feel they have been let down.

Unfortunately, the golfing public who attend tournaments, or watch them on the television, tend to think the greenkeeper has some magic wand that can maintain these conditions for the main part of the season. This is a risky, costly and dangerous route to follow



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with, nine times out of ten, some long-term damage to the quality of putting surfaces.

Jim Arthur in this country and Mr Alexander Radko of the USGA Greens Section have, over the years, made clear their views on the judicious use of fertiliser. I am sure that even fairly heavy applications of nitrogen early in the season can have a lasting effect on the quality of putting surfaces for any one year. This is again an area where greenkeepers can come under pressure. The chap down the road has greens the colour of well grown leeks, and his members think theirs should be the same. Sometimes a delicately balanced programme is not easy for the greenkeeper to live with.

We regularly hear of how fast greens used to be, although at the present time we are cutting more frequently and at dangerously lower heights than at any time I can remember. Ask any older member of greenstaff at any club and you will find that greens were cut at most three times a week and possibly at weekends twice a year for special club occasions, with heights of cut never lower than 3/16th of an inch.

Compare that with today's daily cutting, throughout the season, and at lower heights of cut for greater periods.

Below the safe 5/32nd of an inch we begin to have greens telling us they are under stress, poor thin swards, being invaded with pearlwort and



The Old Course, Sunningdale.

parsley piert, "all the danger signals". I am sure the best possible way to find pace for major club competitions is this height of cut with double mowing, again to be raised as soon as possible.

Since 1977, when the Stimpmeter was first introduced, we have for the first time, accurately been able to measure greenspeed rather than depend on fairly fallable memories. Also, through speaking to many golfers, I have a sneaking feeling that the great majority of the golfing public like medium-paced greens.

Reading a back issue of the USGA Green Section Record it is interesting to note that they recommend greenspeeds they feel can be achieved for regular club golf and a target to achieve for major tournaments of any kind. It is made perfectly clear what they consider can be

achieved safely.

The following is what would be recommended for membership play: Fast 8'6", Medium Fast 7'6", Medium 6'6", Medium Slow 5'6" and Slow 5'0" and below. The preparation for any major event should aim at much faster speeds: Fast 10'6", Medium Fast 9'6", Medium 8'6", Medium Slow 7'6" and Slow 6'6".

Many of the old established clubs in the country take great pride in the fact that they always had fast greens. This can be achieved again but we will, however, experience some pain in getting there. I am sure that the research now being set up at Bingley will make this easier in the long term.

I have a feeling we might just hear about turning the clock back to less water, less fertiliser, raised height of cuts and less frequent mowing.

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