

THE QUICK...

1987 was a year that many greenkeepers will remember.

Having said that, it is also true that most years seem to be exceptional at the time, but when we do all the sums at the end of the year we find that the inches of rain, feet of snow or degrees of frost etc. come very close to average.

Last year was not so very far out of line in most areas of Britain; the exceptional thing is the way these factors combined with the present state of so many courses to push them nearer to total disaster. Nature always repays her debts and extremes average out, but it is worth noting that it is these same extremes (drought, heavy rainfall, cold, heat, etc.) that put stress on the grasses. It is this stress, when combined with a weakened sward, that causes problems so much greater than twenty years ago.

An excellent article on this theme by James F. Moore in the July/August 1987 issue of the *USGA Green Section Record* is entitled "Management on the Edge". The author speaks of the difference for course superintendents between those who run their courses on the edge of success - and those who run them on the edge of failure, "Those clubs with limited play excellent construction and large budgets do just fine".

That combination is rare in Britain and over here this year's weather has been savage for those working, sometimes without realising it, near the edge of failure.

Moore picks out four groups of factors which have led to this unhappy and insecure situation.

1) Turfgrass selection - perhaps that sounds more applicable to the varying climatic areas of the USA with their varying grass requirements, but there is equally a lesson for those in this country who have unconsciously "selected" *Poa Annua* through mistaken manage-

ment methods and find it's incapable of meeting the demands of intensive winter play.

- 2) Chemical usage.
- 3) Fertility practices
- 4) Player demands.

Space does not permit me to enlarge on all these issues, but the downward trend of player demands in terms of reality, or to be more correct, unreality must be stressed.

Past demands for green and "receptive" surfaces have led to dangerous levels of *Poa Annua* infestation. The difficulties in managing this situation have only too often been met with chemical answers. For example the use of fungicide twice a month is not uncommon in the winter months. For those who have gone further downhill to thatch this must have been a desperate year. I have seen golfers attempting to putt across greens so soft the triplex left deep ruts.

Some stories sound just too unlikely to be true and I don't like to have my leg pulled. So I just had to check when I heard of a club which had issued instructions that every shot must be played from small pieces of matting which players were to carry round the course with them. It was true and worse, it is not unique - is there no end to this decline?

1987 has seen a further problem. Most of Britain has experienced a combination of weather which has exposed just how near the edge "modern" greenkeeping is running. Rain a bit above average, but well spread through the year. Lower than normal temperatures and less sunshine meant the ground never really dried out after the end of April. Heavy play continued on wet ground and compaction was difficult to relieve. These conditions were ideal for *Poa Annua* to increase and dense *Poa*, however frequently mown, is a rough grass giving a slower surface.

The media and talkative professional golfers, equally uninformed, have gone overboard about speed of greens and have shown us once again what damage they can do. Every golfer has absorbed pictures of balls sliding across greens like glass. The fact that these have frequently come from U.S. courses with budgets in six figures or with play limited to a few months in the year has not been appreciated. "We must have it on our course" has been the cry and committees have jumped to obey.

It all looked very simple - "just tell them to put the mowers down a bit". No mention of which grasses are to be grown and what effect this drastic treatment might produce.

A vogue has grown up for regular use of the Stimpmeter. This simple device does provide a much needed objective method of measuring

PACE

the speed of greens and it is an improvement on relying solely on the golfer's subjective perception, but a shower of rain can vary readings by two feet or more. Unfortunately it has been seen by the non-technical as the sole method of management. Simply take a reading and cut accordingly - never mind if that results in unacceptable defoliation. Prolonged periods of mowing at 1/8th of an inch kills fine fescues quickly and *Agrostis* within months and even the annual meadow grass which replaces them dies eventually. Greens may be quick, but they may also be dead.

Many greenkeepers have now seen slides taken with magnifying lens of different grasses in the cut state and this has provided further food for thought. Close-ups of *Poa annua* show that, especially before seeding, it is a fleshy and course grass providing considerable resistance to the passage of a rolling ball. Individual stems and leaves stick up in a haphazard fashion. Similar magnifications of *Agrostis Tenuis* and

especially of *Festuca Rubra* show a much smoother and more consistent surface. No wonder putts on *Poa* so frequently just miss where those on greens composed of the finer grasses roll in. *Poa* may look all right to the naked eye, but not in closeup.

Almost daily inspection and frequent photographs have disclosed that even sensible management this year did not prevent an increase in the *Poa annua* content. In fact just three days into a wet spell new green shoots could be seen invading any less dense patches of bent or fescue. At precisely the same time the greens became much slower. They were not being encouraged by fertiliser or added artificial water and with the cooler weather in the autumn rapidly disappeared. A few warm days in December and up they popped again. In general, though, it was noticeable that this invasive competition had thinned out the bent and fescue.

I suspect that, even without this photographic proof, most people will feel that 1987 was a year in which they went backwards in the never ending battle against *Poa annua*. I know that many course managers feel sore that interference by committees demanding faster greens has led to further losses to the enemy.

A report on the speed of greens in '*turf Craft Australia*' in July 1987 by the course superin-

SPEED REPORT

tendent of Royal Melbourne, Peter Williams, seems to have received wide circulation in this country. Even if we don't know Australia, we must be inclined to doubt the statement that the original Sutton's Mixture sown on the greens 60 years ago remains. Nor are we reassured by William's statement "that he has seen both in Australia and America, excellent putting surfaces consisting of a predominance of *Poa annua* and in fact if maintained and prepared cor-

...AND THE DEAD

rectly for tournament or club golf, present a surface equally as good and fast as that of bent greens".

So claims that the greens at Royal Melbourne are cut for tournaments at 1.8mm (about 1/14th of an inch) and more regularly at 2.5mm (about 1/11th of an inch) lead to a sense of disbelief or at least the certainty that fine grasses would not survive such treatment here. It does seem significant that on one day of the Australian Open the players refused to continue their round. The venue? - Royal Melbourne.

In fact, it might be better to make the greens a bit faster at these difficult times by rolling with a weighted hand machine, not forgetting to relieve any resulting compaction by intensified aeration. A more recent article in the *Green Section Record* by Larry Gilhooly makes a further point "Moss invasion is becoming more common as memberships ask for green speeds that are simply not attainable on a regular basis".

The biggest disaster of all, though, was perhaps the disappearance of what I would call "the voice of Experience and Authority". Many greenkeepers have told me privately how much they have missed Jim Arthur's regular pronouncements on current problems. Jim has not disappeared, but has decided to help only those who are a) not too far from Budleigh Salterton and more importantly b) have proved that they will carry out his advice. I will not presume to assess his reasons other than to say that a lesser man would have done so long ago.

In 1987, only Jim's client clubs have been given his authoritative answers to these current problems, an unwelcome shock for those who have not realised the value of an expert second opinion

when pressure is exerted by a customer or employer.

This might be a good time for all those engaged in golf course maintenance to rethink their attitude to agronomists and advisers. Forty years as a general practitioner in a profession does at least qualify me to express strong general views. I built up my own panel of consultants to whom I could refer my difficult patients for the support and comfort of a second opinion. I certainly did not feel that my status was threatened.

Yet some greenkeepers seem to

SECOND OPINION

resent their clubs calling for a second opinion even if the result is to strengthen their hand. In all professions I suppose there will be someone who is so clever they don't need help, but for most of us it is great to have a shoulder to lean on. It is a curious fact that in all professions it is the good practitioner who benefits most from a good adviser.

It goes without saying that I am only referring to qualified and experienced advisers with no commercial attachments.

Experience teaches us all that the best weapon in an argument is a few grey hairs and therefore it takes time to build a reputation as an adviser with the necessary clout".

Looking to the future I am encouraged to feel that the STRI increasingly speaks with authority and I hope that they will add to that a more complete service and fruitful research into the darker corners which still exist in golf course maintenance. In years such as 1987 - and they will come again - we need all the help we can muster.

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