FACE TO FACE

Eddie Park talks to Jeff Perris and David Stansfield of the STRI

THE formation of the Board of Greenkeeping Research at Bingley in 1929 heralded the start of advisory services aimed at British golf courses.

The over-use of lime and fertilisers in the Twenties had caused devastation on hundreds of courses. As a result there was a ready market for the new service, but as the crisis eased it became obvious that golf clubs, sadly lacking leadership by their unions, would not continue their support.

In 1951 the organisation became the Sports Turf Research Institute, offering advisory services and research facilities to ALL sports played on turf. The major supporter then was the Football Association. Golf received little benefit because, although it dominated the Board of Management, it also failed to contribute to research funds.

Yet problems on golf courses were multiplying rapidly. Levels of play had risen dramatically, but levels of aeration did not keep pace and the power of chemicals, fertilisers and irrigation systems all rose sharply. The national and county unions, as representatives of all British golfers, have still not risen from their slumbers, but the Royal and Ancient Golf Club have made considerable contributions to research into golf course problems and Mr. Jim Arthur, in the course of lightening his load, generously handed over a large slice of his business to the STRI without payment.

challenge

On a recent visit to Bingley I was able to see for myself how the challenge is being met and to talk to the Assistant Director (Advisory Services) Jeff Perris, and also to David Stansfield who is now advising the Championship Committee of the R & A on the preparation for Open Championships of Royal Lytham, Royal St. Georges and Royal Birkdale.

specialist advisers

Is there now a Golf Unit with advisers specialising purely in golf courses? Very much so, and in fact it consists of no fewer than six experienced men: Jeff Perris, David Stansfield, David Boocock, Stewart Ormondroyd, Jonathan Tucker and the Director, Peter Hayes, all concentrate their efforts in this field, with others helping out when the pressure is on. This body of specialised expertise has grown rapidly and is still growing to meet demand.

We argued briefly as to whether this service is sufficiently publicised. I am not convinced that the STRI does enough to sell itself, but care is needed to ensure that it does not become too linked with commerce. It may be that the Board of Management should consider a more imaginative approach, but, as ever, the best form of advertisement is to do a good job for the customer.

The policy of presenting seminars in different parts of the country has been very successful, with over fifteen hundred delegates from many clubs taking part.

Leaflets detailing services are now being distributed by the STRI and the most recent quarterly edition of that excellent publication, the Sports Turf Bulletin, is devoted entirely to golf courses.

greater interest

There is now much greater interest in advisory visits at most clubs, usually with attendance by several members of the club management. Jeff commented: "We are not afraid to say that we are the experts, come to us with your problems and we hope we know most of the answers - nobody can yet claim to know ALL the answers".

That led me to ask one of the tougher questions. What was their view of unqualified advisers or salesmen posing as advisers? A mixed blessing in general: "It's usually OK - if they stick to spreading knowledge of the product they are selling, but some step outside their product knowledge into areas where they have neither the education, knowledge or experience to give useful or positive advice." Strong words, but amply justified in the opinion of many observers.

Of course all professional groups have the odd charlatan, and anyway, how do we define a qualified agronomist? All new recruits at Bingley in the past ten years have been University graduates with degrees in some branch of the natural sciences, biology, agriculture, ecology etc, but less frequently nowadays in horticulture. The practicalities of turf science can only be learned by going out on the job and suggestions that a National Turfgrass Diploma alone would be sufficient are discounted.

recommended

The recommended approach is NOT to tell greenkeepers what to do, but rather to suggest a broad policy which will have the most chance of success in the particular environment of the course in question. The setting of targets for possible achievement and for staffing and machinery levels produce a framework within which individual greenkeepers can develop their own methods.

Speaking for myself, I would add the requirement to check that all working practices actually achieve their required objectives.

A frequent observation is that individual greenkeepers (other than real veterans) may lack the breadth of experience of all types of golfing habitats to know, without experiment,

which methods work best and where. The qualified agronomist has the depth of scientific knowledge to relate to the large variety of sites and the extra advantage that he is seeing the whole range all the time.
Apart from the differing requirements of different sites, the experience of seeing so many courses develops an awareness of differing levels of play and leads to further variations of the advice given. It all seems a far cry from the old Bingley reports of twenty years ago which seemed to be the same for all courses.

pertinent

Jeff made another pertinent point: "It is really very sad that most of today's problems are self-inflicted. In spite of better education and awareness in golf, the mistakes made stem usually from club authorities, much more rarely from the greenkeeper. It is not possible to condemn the man with 100% Poa annua greens when you know that the main contributory factor is the pressure from members to mow too closely. That does not alter the fact that Poa annua must always be a most unstable system for golf courses."
That took us on to the question of grass populations and agreement that the ideal surface for golf would be pure fescue, but, on the average golf course site, if you can achieve more that 60% agrostis, spread evenly through the green, you are doing very well indeed. Both men had further thoughts on fescues. David thought that "the chief site for this grass on greens is on limestone heaths and links, which are both free-draining and with a high pH. It is rare to find it on the more acid sites."
Jeff said: "I have a wish regarding fescue turf which stems from two new courses I advise, both on the Continent. Both have a free-draining construction geared to the encouragement of fescue and both were sown to pure fescue (in fact a 50:50 mix of Slender red and Chewings). The chemical Methabenzthiazuron was used to keep out Poa annua (it discourages Agrostis as well). I wish

"Club politics are absolutely disastrous as far as golf courses are concerned"

somebody would have a bash at that in Britain but nowadays there would be some difficulties with pesticide legislation."
I seem to remember that the early work with this chemical was done at Bingley in the Seventies with a view to control of Poa annua, but it was felt that golfers preferred a mixture of Agrostis/Festuca. It has to be stressed that this system could only be successful if the underlying drainage and construction is good."
Of course, this again illustrates the point made by many greenkeepers that many problems in this country are the result of old-fashioned design and construction not geared to the modern all-year-round demand for play. Unhappily, some new constructions in recent years have not proved to be any improvement.

feasibility study

Increasingly the golf unit receives enquiries about the feasibility of new golf course sites. ("It is nice if we are asked in BEFORE a disaster is built"). Unfortunately the feasibility study is often the end of the STRI involvement.
An architect is appointed, draws up plans and says he will supervise the construction himself. David remarked: "That is not always the ideal way to produce a guaranteed end product. New designs must be manageable and fit the site conditions, as well as having architectural merit, and both aspects must be given equal attention in order to produce the best end result".
Jeff had some more general points to make about problems, starting with the commonest one, that far too frequently committees with nil expertise insist that they know best. "But I sometimes think that a greenkeeper is his own worst enemy. A good greenkeeper has four main attributes, not only good theoretical knowledge and good practical skills, but nowadays he will also need good management skills and, especially, good skills in communication. It is on these last two points that many fall down. They know how to manage their course inside-out, but do not possess sufficient skill in managing and motivating their staff, or good enough abilities in organisation, budgeting and, above all, in communication. They must THEMSELVES create a climate in the club where all members automatically think of the head greenkeeper as the number one person to consult about the course."

crisis to crisis

Jeff continued: "David and I both have experience of good greenkeepers who, if left alone, could manage their courses to a high standard, but they fail to communicate adequately with both committees and members, are interfered with, become discouraged and disillusioned and simply settle for doing as they are told. From then on it is a progression from crisis to crisis."
David felt even more strongly: "Club politics are absolutely disastrous as far as golf courses are concerned! The question is what to do, for those politics will not just go away. In fact they are getting worse. Nowadays there can even be a crisis about not strimming round the tee markers!"
As you may have gathered I enjoyed my discussion with these knowledgeable and realistic men. The interview was lengthy and deserves a little more space next month!

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