

SAND GREENS

by Michael Coffey

SO much controversy surrounds this subject that some time ago I decided to put my own thoughts down on paper. By publishing them I shall no doubt be accused of being biased, which I am not, and having a little knowledge - which is always a dangerous thing. But I write as I find.

I suppose my judgement must be coloured to some extent for I doubt that anyone country-wide has listened to more talks, lectures, seminars etc since 1983 on the subject of sand only constructions. However, this piece is written by a golfer - not an agronomist or a constructor or even a qualified greenkeeper.

Firstly, let me say that I have never putted on a decent "sand only construction" green in the UK and that I have putted on perhaps the most uniform putting surface I have encountered, in the desert - again sand only construction.

The greens I have come across in the UK have been patchy, even weed infested and the ball behaved as if it hit a tarmac road.

So why when we have other forms of construction which apparently work quite well do people bother with "sand"?

Well, in choosing this form of construction, cost must play a part. But if it doesn't work in the medium to long term it isn't cheap. The case for using the more traditional method of green construction is argued most eloquently by Jim Arthur on page 22 of this issue. I suspect that the main reasons

a golfer's viewpoint

for the poor end-results in sand-only constructed putting surfaces are:-

- 1) Inexperience of the contractor.
- 2) Poor or unsuitable materials.
- 3) Inexperience of the advisor.
- 4) Isolated constructions. i.e. only one 'replacement' green at a time.
- 5) Inappropriate management.

I confess to having played on only a few courses on which all 18 greens were so built and they are, by common consent, I believe, poorly built and give the head greenkeepers plenty of problems. On the other hand, I have come across several 'one off' constructions, and assured that when the contractor left the sward was perfect bent/fescue, but, that within a relatively short period, the original turf or seeded grass has changed. I assume it must be very difficult to have one management regime for 17 greens and have to adopt an entirely different method for the remaining one. Perhaps this doesn't happen and they all get treated the same.

The other side of the coin is that if you can have a free draining (and surely sand is that) uniform construction that doesn't compact (therefore doesn't need so much aeration which means less surface

disturbance) this must be a good thing. If sand only construction can cope with more traffic, but is more expensive to maintain, never mind! More golfers on good surfaces will create more revenue.

The STRI are part way through research on this subject, funded by the R & A, and Mike Canaway has written an article explaining what has happened so far, but I deliberately wrote this piece prior to reading Mike's article and the STRI's findings to date.

Sand green constructions are to have a further boost as the South course at Wentworth will have greens constructed on this principle. This I wholly commend - for if this system is to work then there can be no better true "trial plot" and testing ground than at Wentworth. The course has as its advisors the STRI, the specification for the construction has been approved by them, so Wentworth have the best advice available. In Kevin Munt, Wentworth have an exceptional course manager who believes totally in the concept. Kevin has promised that his management programme and statistical records will be made public. So, hopefully, during 1989 we will have even more information both from the STRI and Wentworth.

Sand-only green construction is a fact, and like it or not, it will not go away - but perhaps in the meantime it is better to use the devil you know rather than the devil under research.

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