

FACE TO FACE

"DURING my first six weeks at St. Pierre in early 1986 I recall the courses being frozen so hard it was impossible to change any of the holes on the greens. It wasn't long before I came to realise that the job in hand was much more challenging than any of my previous appointments.

Managing two full-size golf courses - the Old and the New - to the standard capable of withstanding the normal pounding from some 800 members and the thousands of visitors attracted to the picturesque St. Pierre complex is very much a full time job. My job is made far easier thanks to the support, and hard work, of my greenstaff. Without the support of a dedicated crew, no course manager would survive.

Following an absence of three years, 1986 saw St. Pierre's famous Old Course once again chosen to stage a major European professional tournament - the new and exciting Epon Grand Prix of Europe matchplay event.

The sponsors, of course, expected the Old Course to be in top condition in time for the tournament. Not a tall order normally, but there were a couple of serious problems to contend with during my first winter at St. Pierre. The greens were predominantly annual meadow grass (*Poa Annua*), and had apparently been fertilized quite late in the year. They were riddled with large fusarium scars.

Poa Annua is very prone to fusarium. That's not to say that the more desirable Bent grasses (*Agrostis*), which are the indigenous grasses of this area, are not affected by fusarium,

David Jones, Course Manager at St Pierre

but *Poa* is far more readily attacked. So, when you have the situation where meadow grass is fertilized late in the year, you will always get Fusarium.

The second problem was that there was more of a thatch layer in the greens than I would have liked. If you have a putting surface that is soft under foot and imprints, then a smooth putting surface cannot be easily maintained - a point worth thinking about when members request extra irrigation to help stop balls on greens.

TEMPTED

If I had been the sort of course manager to press the panic button then, perhaps I might have been tempted to 'tart up' the greens for the Epon with heavy applications of fertilizer. But my belief is that consistently good putting surfaces are only achieved by sound, long term management. I could not apply long term management from February to May so I decided to aim to

achieve the smoothest putting surfaces possible in the time that was available with the application of as many light top dressings as we could get on to the greens prior to the tournament.

St. Pierre was typical of many courses in the UK that had been over fed and over watered. Since the early 70's when automatic irrigation was installed in many courses, it has become too easy for greenkeepers to apply water and fertilizer.

As soon as greens started looking a little pale, on went the NPK and water to soak it in. Then the greenkeeper could sit back and take the praise from the members.

Many greens up and down the country were fed like this four or five times a year, and so it went on, until greens got in the sorry state that many are still in.

I had spent some difficult years at my last course implementing a management policy I believed in. I was not about to take any shortcuts at St. Pierre just

Below:

TOURNAMENT PREPARATION



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because I had a big tournament on my hands. There are twelve months in the year and it is my job to ensure that the courses in my charge are in tip-top condition for as many of those months as possible - not for merely one or two special weeks.

I think it is fair to say that some greenkeepers over fed greens in the firm belief that no harm was being done, not taking into consideration the fact that if more leaf is being produced than nature can break down, "thatch" build-up is inevitable.

CAREFUL

Nowadays, greenkeepers are much more careful with the use of water and fertilizers. This situation can be attributed to the endeavours of J H Arthur who, through his straight talking to both greenkeepers and greens committees alike, has made people stop and think about what they are doing. Jim Arthur is a man I have a great respect for, not only as a friend but as the country's leading agronomist.

Having got my first Epsom Grand Prix over without any severe criticism about course condition, we embarked upon the uphill struggle to improve the all year round playability of the two courses. I knew this would take years rather than months to achieve, and that brickbats and not bouquets would be heading my way for quite a while.

I have the pleasure of working with Jim Arthur at St. Pierre. I had studied previous reports written by Jim, who is our agronomist, to determine which of his recommendations were in need of being more closely followed.



Above:
TENTED VILLIAGE SITE

I decided to increase aeration on the fairways in the autumn, and on both tees and greens throughout the year.

We aim for a target of 60 passes per year on the greens, and as often as weather permits on the fairways. Aeration definitely does the trick, and the puddles and ponding which previously resulted after heavy rainfall do not now occur. You can't aerate too often on fairways or greens. As long as the aeration slits do not open up during dry weather, the more aeration the better.

Obviously, deep aeration gives the benefit of getting water through the soil. It is also necessary to allow air into any thatch you may have, because if you don't get air into it, it's not going to break down.

CONTROLLED

Controlled feeding of the greens with a mixture of sulphate of ammonia, hoof and horn and sulphate of iron, twice a year is part of the programme; coupled with light top dressings of a mixture comprising of four parts sand and one part Fen soil applied every six weeks in the growing season. A spray mix of sulphate of iron in water is used to maintain a reasonable colour without creating a lush growth of grass. This also helps with resistance to fungal disease.

In following this policy we do find that the Poa Annua

contracts the disease Anthracnose quite badly in the early autumn. This often looks very worrying, and one does suffer a certain amount of "stick", but areas of Poa that are removed by Anthracnose are soon re-colonized with Agrostis, and so the process goes on. It is important to continue top dressing during this time to try and maintain putting surfaces, and keep your head down! I can assure you, it is well worth bringing about the change in grass species.

Some time ago I was asked if I was trying to introduce a new grass species. Was it perhaps the hard wearing American Pencross grass, I was asked. No, I said, I am not introducing pencross, or any other new grass. What will happen is that gradually, very gradually, the indigenous Agrostis grass will re-colonize itself because the

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now accepted methods to rid the greens of Poa will slowly take effect.

As for Pencross, my personal opinion is that it looks quite nice from a distance, but I am not yet convinced that it likes our climate. I have not had any experience of managing Pencross greens, but from those I have seen at courses such as The Belfry, I am not convinced that they have managed to retain such a high percentage of Pencross in their sward. In fact, the last time I played at The Belfry, it was evident that the greens were becoming predominantly Poa, with only small colonies of Pencross remaining.

The only greens that I have seen which looked as if they had taken well with Pencross, are the ones at St. Mellion in Cornwall. They were pleasant colour, with an even surface cover, but I found them slower to put on in comparison with St. Pierre.

Whether Pencross will stand the closeness of mowing and verticutting required to give it some pace, coupled with our climate, I have yet to be convinced.

GRAND PRIX

The first week of May 1988, sees the Epson Grand Prix being staged here at St. Pierre for the third successive year. Last year we had comments about greens being slow. This year, with less Poa in the greens, we expect them to be quicker, in fact, as quick as they can be for the time of year.

"As for Pencross... it looks quite nice from a distance, but I am not quite convinced it likes our climate."

Obviously the sponsors are well satisfied with the present state of the Old Course. However, it is planned to make the course more difficult by introducing a few new tees to lengthen the course. Alterations to three greens are also planned, which will no doubt make certain of St. Pierre's place as a major tournament venue.

I do feel, however, that early May is sometimes pushing nature somewhat for such a major tournament in this country; but all you can do is your best!

ATMOSPHERE

Since being employed by Country Club Hotels, who own a number of other similar complexes in Britain, I have no desire to return to a club run solely by its members. I enjoy the atmosphere of working for, and being made to feel part of, the team' of a large, and successful, golf/hotel leisure company.

Although I am responsible to Mr. Geoffrey Glynn-Jones, the director of golf for Country Club Hotels, I am left to manage my own courses, as long as I do not exceed the agreed budget.

As we look on our courses as being the main reason that people visit St. Pierre, we have the sense to ensure that, whatever monies are required to maintain our high standards are made available. Having now worked in a strictly commercial area, I would find it most difficult to go back to a working atmosphere where one has to follow the instructions of a committee, who know little or nothing about golf course management.

I have played golf since I was six years of age, and still enjoy the

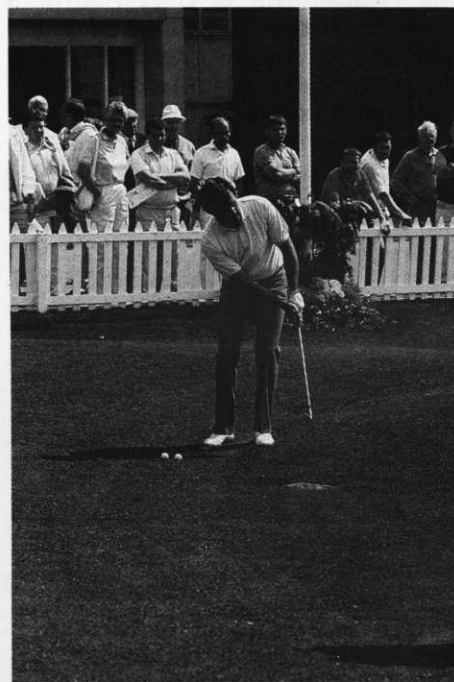
game. I am always keen to extend my knowledge of course management by attending seminars and conferences.

RESPONSIBLE

I was partly responsible for the setting up of the EIGGA - English and International Golf Greenkeepers Association, which has since opted to amalgamate with two other associations to become BIGGA - British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association. I am no longer involved, or play an active part in Association matters, as two golf courses and a major tournament take up all my time."

Below:

SEVE BALLESTEROS, A SEVERE CRITIC OF THE GREENS IN 1987



A follow-up article by David Jones on his experiences with the Epson Grand Prix in 1988 will appear in a future issue.