

# Greenkeeping today ...

GREENKEEPING practices and, with them, the condition of our courses, seem very vulnerable to a cyclic pattern of slow recovery from disasters directly caused by the enthusiasms of the unqualified, only to rapidly deteriorate again on a ten year pattern, sacrificed yet again to the short sighted interests of minorities who have neither the training nor the understanding to see the whole picture. Virtually none of these self styled experts can even identify one grass from another.

Many of those responsible for disastrous policies and their effects on course condition base their advocacy of wrong treatments on theories and practices they have seen implemented in other countries, notably the United States. Such policies may be effective for those areas where they have evolved to meet special problems, e.g. severely arid conditions, as found in the Middle East, but they are not relevant to conditions in Britain and most European countries.

Greenkeeping in Britain is not a complicated study, neither is it an exact science, but it obeys logical and easily understood rules. We are concerned, admittedly under wide ranging conditions, with the cultivation and encouragement of two grass species, fescue and bent and the discouragement of a third, *Poa Annua*. A weed has been described as "a very successful plant out of place" and with its track record of colonisation of bare ground and taking over fine turf areas and its ubiquity all over temperate zones of the world, *Poa Annua* must be one of the most successful weeds of all time!

When discussing criteria of quality - in every aspect of life let alone greenkeeping - there is a choice between laying down the law without explanation or arguing the reasons behind statements, which may create more confusion than conviction.

However if we talk about good and bad greenkeeping methods, and good and bad course condition, explanations and definitions are unavoidable. IT IS THE END RESULT RATHER THAN THE METHOD ITSELF WHICH MUST BE OUR YARDSTICK. Perfection is difficult to achieve, but it is clearly impossible if there is no agreement on the definition of perfection. The first step must be to define these standards in the broadest terms.

**The simplest definition is that good golf courses should provide ideal conditions of play all the year round, or as near to 365 days a year as severe frost or snow cover permits, but remember we are talking about Britain. Good conditions mean fine textured, firm yet resilient, dry and well drained putting surfaces; tees**

**which are almost identical to greens save only in height of cut; and fairways which provide fine wiry turf, giving tight lies, only from which can control i.e. backspin, be imparted to the ball, since if grass gets between ball and clubface, the end result is a flier and no control.**

Sadly these conditions do not always appeal to all members. We are told in a dry summer that the greens are too firm and why isn't the water, for which the members paid so much, used to make the greens hold better? If those in charge give in to these demands the result is thatch and many weeks of temporary greens in winter.

It is beyond argument that annual meadow grass cannot, even in the mildest of winters, give good surfaces, especially towards the end of winter. In fact, the more open the winter, the more play and wear, and the thinner and bumpier the turf becomes. This is totally unsurprising as annual meadow grass has, despite its varied forms, a very short life-cycle and by the end of winter is dying on its feet. It also has



"The encouragement of two grasses fescue and bent"

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by Jim Arthur





**"Good golf course should provide ideal conditions of play all the year round"**

soft non-fibrous leaves and wears badly, as well as being susceptible to disease, not least the dreaded Anthracnose or Die Back, which hits annual meadow grass under low fertility conditions, thus giving those in charge the impossible choice between feeding and ensuring totally dominant annual meadow grass greens or continuing with a sensibly restricted nitrogen-only fertiliser policy, ending up, temporarily at least, with bare greens and irate members.

Assessment of quality is difficult because there are so many different standards. The tournament professional wants something vastly different from the average member and cares not one whit if the greens are killed by shaving them to achieve his ideas of perfection for one week out of fifty two. The poorer player likes holding greens and, perhaps being a fair weather golfer, is unimpressed by arguments about the inevitable corollary of soft thatchy bogs all winter. The spectator-golfer comments favourably on colour - the "nice and green" school. I fear it is only the minority who value the old standards as pearls beyond price, and indeed such traditional standards are getting harder to find each year.

Courses tarted up for professional events may look attractive to those brought

up to understand that "green is great" and indeed such presentation may hide a host of major troubles. Sadly, however, as troughs invariably follow peaks, the penalty for such artificiality is to see serious deterioration for many weeks or months afterwards.

Having failed to achieve fast greens by cultivating fine grasses, we then find demands by ignorant golfers to shave greens down to 1/8th inch for months on end in a misguided and vain attempt to emulate the unrealistically fast putting surfaces manufactured for televised tournament golf worldwide. These people fail to take into account the vastly different climate, financial resources, intensity of play, staffing and machinery levels and a host of other factors in other golfing countries and that such shaving is not possible for prolonged periods anywhere in the golfing world.

It is, I think, safe to say that in Britain there are more courses in poor order for some part of the year than consistently play well all the year round. The wrong reasons are advanced by many for this regrettable state of affairs. We are told that the all year round excellence of such courses as Walton Heath and Lindrick, to quote but two, is due to their being on sandy free draining soil". The only sand at Walton Heath is in the bunkers and the greens at both courses are

laid out on heavy calcareous clay, admittedly overlying chalk or limestone.

The real reason for excellence at any course is not hard to find. It is, in one word, continuity - a combination of members wanting the best and one amiable dictator seeing that they get it. That dictator may be a course manager, if he has the power, a devoted and permanent chairman/convener of a green committee, or even secretaries or the chairman of a proprietary club. Perfection in my experience is never found where policies change with changing committees. The best green committee consists of one person.

Howard Keele who asked to be chairman of green at his local club, on the grounds that to anyone who could sort out J.R.Ewing, handling the average club member would be child's play. He accepted, provided that the green committee was made up of uneven numbers, and three was too many!

Sadly our Horatios, subject to constant complaints and yet receiving very little praise when things go well or even recognition of their time and energy consuming tasks, eventually despair and go, and then the snapping terriers at their heels see a God-sent opportunity to impose their ideas, and the result is disaster and another course is lost.