

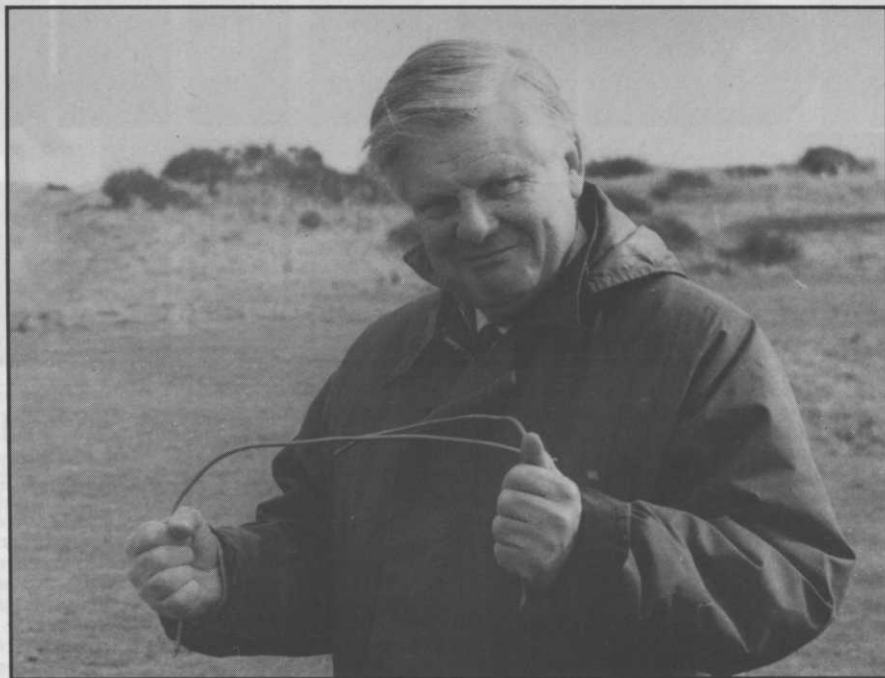
Agreement is vital

IT has taken twenty years of hard slogging, by exhortation, explanation, demonstration and results to achieve broad agreement on a very few basic greenkeeping principles, and these are still not agreed by all and are constantly under attack.

What then are the basic points we have largely, if not universally, agreed. Very few, if one is realistic, yet such agreement is vitally important if greenkeeping is not to suffer cyclic patterns of disaster and recovery. Disagreement leaves greenkeepers and greenkeeping vulnerable to the malign influences of members, professionals and the unqualified pursuing misguided objectives with irrelevant methods.

Education is the secret, but at all levels, and perhaps nowhere more importantly than with members, from whose ranks are recruited future chairmen and conveners as well as captains. Continuity is a sure fire winner where it is combined with a proper understanding of greenkeeping principles and a full acceptance of what constitutes ideal golf course conditions.

Where then have we achieved some measure of agreement on greenkeeping practices? Firstly, on fertiliser usage, where most greenkeepers and advisers have accepted the fact, proven by research, that annual meadow grass increases and finer species decrease with increasing phosphate and potash levels. There are still some who advise use of NPK fertilisers including some inexperienced advisers and fertiliser firms, but a gratifying number of the latter advise and supply nitrogen only for golf greens. Investigations at the STRI, backed by R & A funds, linking chemical and botanical characteristics of golf greens



in profile analyses at different depths, confirm the link between high phosphate and annual grass dominance. It is known that phosphate levels as low as 10-15 ppm are quite adequate to support fine leaved agrostis and fine fescues. A recent analysis of the greens on a frequently televised links course shows figures from over 800 ppm to well in excess of 1,000 ppm. There are no prizes for guessing the grass type, virtually pure poa annua, and the Club has no chance of changing that situation without a complete rebuild of all the greens. Those greenkeepers still using NPK fertilisers in large quantities are leaving a dreadful legacy behind them.

It is all too typical of the failure by those setting themselves up as advisers, to see basic truths, claiming that those previously advising nitrogen only have changed their minds. This is based on, amongst other factors, a lecture given by STRI on the management of pure sand greens where, because the grass is grown hydroponically, both

phosphate and potash are needed, or the grass dies. Annual meadow grass invades as a result and this is one reason why pure sand greens have no relevance outside hot, arid zones of the world - but of that, more anon!

Another point on which there is basic agreement is the need for intensive aeration to combat the consolidating effects of traffic. Again we can argue about how to do it but not about how often, which admittedly varies. On one famous links the fescue dominant greens are very unconsolidated, and aeration is confined to six greens once per year with excellent results, because there is little play and so little resultant compaction. With more intensive use, we need much more frequent and deeper aeration, hence the dramatic success of the Vertidrain, a machine which I had the greatest difficulty in introducing into Britain from Holland, to the extent even that a last minute cancellation by one club, stopped a Dutch contractor coming over to Vertidrain six courses before the machine

was available over here. It is this slow acceptance of good new ideas which is as depressing as the rapid acceptance of gimmicks.

It took two more years of hard graft to persuade both clubs and contractors that this really was a better deeper method of aeration to get at deep seated pans - yet it is only mechanising the method widely used 60 and more years ago of raise-forking, inserting hand forks and prising them back. Today of course everyone is in on the act, many contractors and some clubs with their own machines yet what a task it was to start it - as its inventors are now finding in the United States.

A third measure of agreement is to irrigate sparingly, and in the case of pop-ups, to use them to the minimum possible level nightly in drought

periods. Yet there are advisors not the STRI or myself, who advise watering only once or twice a week, saturating the greens and letting them dry out - demonstrably ridiculous in practical terms of water demand and potential absorption by greens as well as being technically incorrect. There are still firms, not members of the British Turf Irrigation Association, fitting three heads, not four or more, to greens larger than 400 sq. yds. This is in direct contravention of BTIA standards. The result of spacing heads further apart than the technical maximum, the so called head-to-head cover, is uneven coverage and missed areas, especially under marginal operating conditions, such as wind. Then we find the pop-ups turned on for longer periods in a vain

attempt to cover the missed areas. The result, inevitably, is that the wet areas get waterlogged and the missed areas stay missed.

Our last measure of agreement, and it took much longer to achieve, is that there is no place for perennial ryegrass, even the so called dwarf strains, on any golf course in Britain. Yet one golf architect is still using ryegrass for fairways, despite the awful end result and the impossibility of imparting back spin from such lush meadowland lies. My advice to greenkeepers and others is to only buy seed from firms who specifically recommend non-ryegrass mixtures for tees and fairways.

Our next objective must be to agree on green construction and I will discuss that in my next article.

by Jim Arthur



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