

Big shortage of good course managers

As more and more golf courses are being built in Britain and Europe Jim Arthur expresses his concern that many will suffer because of the shortage of good, well qualified managers

It is not only in golf greenkeeping that concern is being expressed about the effects of 'traffic' on sports turf. One sees comments in the tennis world from such a respected head groundsman as Jim Thorn at the All England Club that management techniques have not kept abreast of the effects of stress and pressures from play and that unqualified, unskilled people are put in charge of court maintenance at many Clubs, merely because they had been club professionals. The same applies to cricket - where criticisms are made of wickets not standing up to increased traffic, again because techniques have not kept pace with the effect of extra traffic.

However, it would be neither appropriate nor wise to venture into such areas in a golf greenkeeping Magazine! We have enough problems of our own.

In generalising about trends, it must always be taken into account that the excellent condition of the relatively few courses in improving condition which not only have withstood all the effects of misguided policies of the past two decades but also the effect of increased play and wear caused by two relatively mild and certainly open winters, may make a dispassionate assessment difficult. Equally the appalling condition of our worst courses - I will not venture into assessing what proportion of the total they constitute and certainly not to identify them! - nor to mention the number of courses where greens are shut for weeks on end in winter, or even, as in some, members being condemned to temporary greens and playing off mats ALL winter, may induce too pessimistic an approach!

How many times have I stressed that there is no more important person on any golf course than its head man.

Those in long term charge of member

clubs especially must accept that they are very, very vulnerable since there is a desperate shortage of experienced trained and skilled head men and this situation will get worse. This is exacerbated by many factors.

First and foremost, any sensible employers (in whatever industry, and golf today is certainly an industry!) make sure (or should do) that their indispensable key men are so well looked after - not just financially and with pension schemes but in the esteem in which they are held, - that they are almost 'unpoachable'. Therefore there is a reduced availability of senior men looking for better prospects. Secondly, by the historical accident that so many Greenkeepers came back after the War from the Forces, equally many will be retiring at the same time. Parallel with this, of course, is the decline in numbers of school leavers making it imperative that greenkeeping sells itself as a respected, well paid profession with excellent opportunities to Careers officers and others responsible for guiding our BEST school leavers into greenkeeping - instead of, as in earlier decades, regarding it as a last option for those "wanting an outdoor life" - often synonymous sadly with the description "strong in the arm and thick in the head".

The main threat comes, of course, from the new courses being built as part of hotel and leisure complexes, or by developers both in Britain and Europe. Such bodies know they have to poach and are more than willing to do so, having long experience in paying the going rate and more, and in treating their managers as managers! The relief of those excellent men who have moved from members' clubs, where every upstart or novice member feels qualified to criticize them and where Captains playing off 20 and

worse, regard themselves as having a God given right to fire good men, just because a long serving experienced head man reckons he knows rather more than the Captain about greenkeeping, is illuminating!

At a conservative guess we are going to need some 500 head men in the next decade (or less), if current estimates of new course projects are even half accurate. On top of this we need back-up trained staff replacement of retirees.

When 'labour' is in short supply wages escalate - and this has been true ever since the Black Death. If 'member clubs' whose parrot cry to any attempt to lead them into the twentieth century is to vote down any increase in subscriptions and who claim to own as well as have the right to run their club - whereas in truth they are merely temporary custodians for future generations, - fail to respond to this financial pressure, they will soon find they have only second class greenkeepers, trainees, or those stalwarts motivated by loyalty, love of their course or reluctance to move, to look after their courses.

The problem of finance has induced Treasurers to increasingly encourage and rely on societies - not all of whom are proficient players. Whilst this revenue, which sometimes exceeds the total of members' subscriptions, may balance the books it is not free! In fact, wear is disproportionately higher and an appreciable proportion of this revenue ought, but rarely is, diverted back to course maintenance. A recent survey of a number of south county clubs showed that eliminating all societies (NOT green fees) would have to be balanced by increasing the subscriptions by varying amounts, generally £50-£100 p.a. Yet in EVERY club, members voted the proposal down, often overwhelmingly. Too mean

LOOKING AHEAD

to pay an extra £1 a week to enjoy more fully their own club's facilities! It defies belief!

So much for the problem - what of solutions? Obviously the first priority must be to see that GOOD men are proportionately rewarded - and provided with pensions and other perquisites but also to see that they are treated as skilled professional managers - if they are! Failure by their employers to regard school teachers as being a respected and worthwhile profession is far more behind their present discontent than mere salary levels.

Secondly we need better and more intensive education. Whilst there are VERY few colleges teaching good greenkeeping, we are in general training no more GOLF greenkeepers in a year, than we were a decade earlier. What is worse is that in many cases they are not being trained in any way differently than 20 years ago - it is only the skill and devotion of a mere handful of dedicated college lecturers interpreting and re-thinking an outmoded and often totally wrong syllabus in order to meet today's problems, which prevents the whole education scheme being a fiasco. This is why it is so depressing for a meeting of college lecturers convened to discuss standardising, modernising or interpreting the City and Guilds syllabus to dismiss my pleas with the words "you are not going to do a Baker on us".

Seminars do not address themselves to current problems, the chief of which is the effect of traffic, but waste time and money inviting speakers from the other side of the Atlantic. Many of them have ideas which (however relevant they are, and this is sometimes debatable, to their own special conditions) are totally irrelevant not only to Northern European conditions but are (as one of the USGA Green Section's Agronomists told me when he stayed with me this year), equally irrelevant to most of the States also. We waste vast sums, not only in copying the mistakes made earlier, but in research, to PROVE wrong what we have known to be wrong for years. PURE sand greens (not a 'sand soil' mix) designed to take the massive irrigation required under arid, very hot conditions and where extreme heat kills off any invading meadow grass have no relevance to our conditions. If these 'hydroponic' greens are not fed NPK they die and if they are, they degenerate at once to annual meadow grass.

There is insufficient 'post graduate' training for skilled men - really only

two satisfactory 5 day courses, once a year and always over-subscribed. The money is there as never before but there are too many debates about how it is to be used and too much dilution of resources. Frankly, greenkeeping education has by and large stagnated, since those optimistic days when we thought we could standardise curricula and concentrate education at a few controllable centres.

The situation is I am assured no better in the States, where a far smaller proportion of clubs take advantage of the USGA Green Section's advisory service than do clubs here with S.T.R.I. Furthermore I am told that an even smaller proportion of U.S. superintendents are member of the GCSAA than the proportion in the U.K., who joined B.I.G.G.A. though their vast numbers at their annual jamborees makes this difficult to believe!

Respected golf writers such as Michael Williams and Donald Steel plead for better courses, better able to stand up to the vagaries of our weather (we do not have a climate!) and to produce not only first class conditions for major events but the same standards all the year round. Who is more important? A handful of talented and overpaid young men who care only that it is right on the day, or the all year round golfer, who should surely expect his course to be at the very least playable, whenever he wants to play it.

There are pleas for an end to the divisions that seem to beset the greenkeeping world, which are often less basic than it would appear. There are suggestions for a ruling authority to lay down standards for course management and presentation. Surely this is there already in the Royal and Ancient, working through its appointed body, the Golf Section of the Sports Turf Research Institute.

What we must eliminate are bad greenkeepers, and there are still many relying on fertilisers and water to tart

up their courses, be this for a major Tournament or their own Captain's day - not understanding, or worse not caring, that this way lies thatch, annual meadow grass, temporary greens and course deterioration. I have no patience with those who say we have to learn to live with annual meadow grass - even though I accept that past bad greenkeeping has often left an impossible legacy and control will necessarily be slow. So many of those who regard their awful meadow grass greens as inevitable have excellent bent approaches and fairways!

Finally, everyone from those in charge of clubs to those in charge of courses should note the avowed intention of the PGA to gain more control of the game. Whilst I rate many club professionals as my personal friends, there is no doubt that the interests of too many professionals in either group are opposed to those of members and players. This in no way implies that the interest of any club's professional in his Club's course should be discouraged, but he must not interfere with course management, any more than Greenkeepers should interfere with the way he runs HIS business. In far too many cases, malcontent members find their professional a willing focus for their grumbles - and once this happens, disaster and deterioration follow. Whilst undoubtedly the best way to run anything is through an amiable dictator there are two main problems - how to keep him amiable and how to stop him giving up - because it really is one of the most thankless tasks in the world to try to meet the opposed desires of the average membership - half of which are totally incompatible with the other.

The message is - especially to member 'controlled' clubs - to look after your good men, remembering that skilled staff are impossible to find and even bad ones are scarce.

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