

How to manage a course in the Swiss Alps

Ian Tomlinson, the greenkeeper who took his British "know how" to Europe and has never regretted the move. Here he discusses some of the problems he faces at Lausanne.

It is more than six years since I left England to work in the Romand (French) part of Switzerland, at Lausanne Golf Club.

Without hoping to seem too unpatriotic, I cannot see myself returning to the home country in the conceivable future because, to be frank there is so much opportunity on the Continent to enjoy such a high standard of living. Though hand in hand with the "good life" goes the necessity to earn it. That means hard work, long hours, accountability and all the responsibility required to manage one of the best golf courses in Switzerland.

The golf boom has hit Europe, including Switzerland, small as it is, in a big way. Our problem is finding suitable land for a course in a country where two thirds of the terrain consists of mountains and lakes, which raises the cost of an adaptable hundred plus acres to astronomical prices.

To give you an example of the money involved, the land around Lausanne Golf Club is currently fetching £105 per square metre, so with a calculator you will be able to work out for yourself the purchase cost to lay down a new 18 hole construction.

(Editor's note: For those without a conversion table there are 4,047 sq. metres to the acre).

Golf is still a sport for the rich in Switzerland and for that reason is not popular with the media. Because it is of necessity a pastime of minority interest to the bulk of the population, planning permission for new courses has become difficult to obtain even if someone is prepared to put up the capital.

One or two new courses have been built, but when this is equated with membership joining fees of £15,000 to £25,000, you can see why it is regarded as only a sport for the ultra wealthy.

So we find ourselves in a position not unfamiliar to the UK, where not enough new courses are under construction to cater for demand and those that are in existence, like ours at Lausanne are getting heavier play.

Last year in a Golf World survey Lausanne was rated in Europe's top 14,



Complete new drainage system of green 12

an accolade guaranteed to increase our fair share of visitors. Add to that the 1,130 members of the club, who also want to play the course and it is not difficult to imagine the pressure we are under throughout the playing season.

Unfortunately our greens were never constructed to take this volume of traffic so it was inevitable that problems had to arise. The first of these was drainage and you will see why from the photographs by the packed clay in the pipes.

Further investigation on a work plan to install a new drainage system on six of the greens, revealed what must be to a greenkeeper a "horror nightmare".

Within three to four inches of the green surface we found a layer of yellow and blue clay. Digging deeper to a couple of feet below the surface we discovered the original natural turf which had not seen the Swiss sunshine for nearly 70 years. Below this was a foot or so of quality soil. Words failed us, though one or two did pass our lips, but they are not repeatable even though I have learned to swear in at least two languages.

On three of the greens investigated no drains existed even worn out ones and this obviously promotes poa annua and resultant thatch.

Thatch is fairly prevalent on all the greens, which we are over coming by hollow tining four times a year, followed by the application of a sandy top dressing.

The obvious solution to such badly constructed greens would be to re-build them all, but then one is faced with the difficulty of convincing the members, who only seeing the playing surface are perfectly content as they are.

The course is at an altitude of 3,000 feet above sea level, closed by snow for three months of the year, so the prospects of shortening the playing season even further by having the greenstaff re-building the greens is certain to be a most controversial issue.

Since last year the club are now more aware of the problems we have with the greens as Jeff Perris from the STRI at Bingley was invited to survey the course and submitted a detailed report on its condition. Jeff's recommendation was a reconstruction of all 18 greens over a two or three year period, so it is now up to the membership to decide.

Last year a new Chairman of the Green Committee was appointed, who misunderstood his role from day one of taking office. He would decide a work programme and set down how and when it should take place.

MANAGEMENT

This was naturally a receipt for disaster, so after five months of disagreements he finally resigned. The outcome has been every greenkeeper's dream! The general committee decided to dissolve the green committee, not appoint a new green chairman and pass to me, the total responsibility for running the golf course.

It is a pity more golf clubs in the UK do not adopt a similar policy and allow the man in charge of the course to maintain it as he thinks fit and be accountable for its condition and playability.

The course suffers from the damage that has been caused to the trees from aerial pollution carried on the winds for hundred of miles from the industrial regions of other countries. It is a problem which is showing little sign of improvement despite the now growing acceptance and concern expressed in the European Parliament.

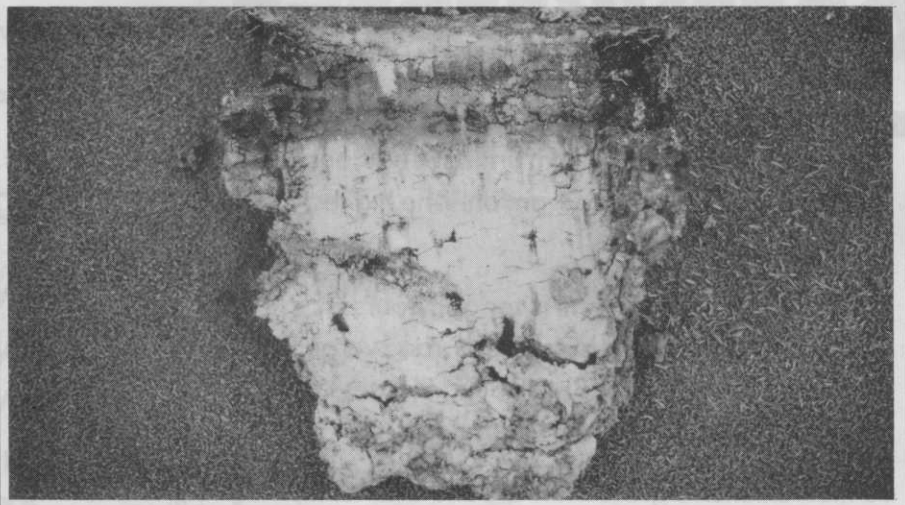
I have just marked another ten trees that need felling and the thought has occurred to me that if destruction continues at this incredible rate, how long will it be before the grass succumbs to environmental pollution. To give an idea how devastating is the problem, we have had to plant over 250 new trees in the last three years.

control cables with millions of volts, blasting the electronic decoders to bits, stopping at the T.W.I. controller which had to be replaced.

Watermation were called in to study the problem and this season we have had fitted 30 new lightning protection devices to the electric cables so if we

fairway drains in the near future, the price was equated against the £40,000 purchase of the JCB which has already more than paid for itself.

We needed to replace a 35 year old Dexta with its front loading bucket and the JCB used by our own staff has replaced a collapsed drain, shaped



Top 10" of green 4. Note no top soil just pure clay

are hit again it will take the sting out of the charge before it arrives at the central control box. Only time will tell if it works. Meanwhile every thunder-

new bunkers in hours and built new tees. After just one season in use this has proved to be a most intelligent investment.

Thankfully we have had little turf disease for the past two years, perhaps a sign that our management programme is moving the course in the right direction.

Despite all the work that needs doing on the course I have taken on the job of organising the first Swiss Romande Greenkeepers Golf Championship, which will include staff from six clubs over the border in France.

One of the missing ingredients to working abroad is the lack of regular contact with one's colleagues, unlike in England where one can almost lean over the hedge to discuss a predicament. If this event can become an annual affair it will bring us all together at least once a year to exchange views.

Here we have only 32 clubs throughout all Switzerland, necessitating a rucksack, climbing boots, ropes and crampons for an expedition over the mountains just for a chat!

One of those who has given me great help since I arrived in Switzerland is Leslie Beetham at the Club de Bonmont, opened in 1983, between Lausanne and Geneva. Leslie is to take over a new Robert Trent-Jones project in mainland Spain and I would like to take this opportunity to extend to him my best wishes and those of greenkeeper colleagues who have valued his friendship and advice.



Old drain of green 4

About four years ago we had a new irrigation system installed by Watermation, which apart from odd teething problems has been fantastic, that is until last year when we had a major catastrophe - lightning!

Because of the altitude and the surrounding mountains, the course is exposed to a number of violent electrical storms during the long hot summer.

Last year following one of the more severe outbreaks I arrived at the course to find lightning had gone to earth and charged up the underground electric

storm will be viewed with some foreboding.

As far as purchase of maintenance equipment is concerned the club have been most supportive. We bought our own Verti-drain to loosen up the heavy clay in the sub soil which has made an immense improvement to the root growth.

Another excellent buy has been a JCB, bought after we paid a local contractor to put in a fairway drain 200 metres long and a metre deep and the cost was £7,000! As we will need to replace a couple of miles of