

# INCREASED WEAR IS A MAJOR PROBLEM ON BRITISH COURSES

says . . . Jim Arthur

**M**any are the problems that beset those in charge of our golf courses in this changing age - but the worst is caused by the success of the game in attracting so many new entrants, aided and abetted by televised golf, which in 30 years has turned what was, south of the Border anyway, a rather elitist game into possibly the second most widely practiced participator sport, now looking to overtake even angling at the top of the tree. The problem is *wear*, caused by all that extra traffic. It is not helped by so many new golfers being unable to obtain membership of a club, that might inform them as well as control them. The clubless golfer today cannot be reached through the normal disciplines of club structure and administration and only if at all through the media.

Whilst the worst effect of extra traffic is undoubtedly wear and the resultant damage to playing surfaces, it is not the only one. We must also consider the insensitivity of golf's new entry or some of it, towards course maintenance which must never according to their books, get between them and their game.

There have, of course, been aggravating factors which have affected course-management - chiefly the effect of constantly changing direction (in every sense) as regularly changing Green Committees, desperate to assuage complaining members, impose one cure after another - with predictably unsuccessful results. Whether these changes are effected with the complaisance of, or against the expressed views of the Course Manager, the results are the same.

Frankly, the situation has now got to a point where the influence of greenkeeping, as such, has little or no effect on the problem. Intensive aeration, all the year round is banned by the over-sensitivity of those in command to members' complaints. As one example, Vertidrainage is ordered to be carried out far too late in the season, so as not to interfere with the last monthly medal - and then when surfaces are disturbed heavy sanding is ordered, resulting in smearing, smothering, disease and wheel marking and many a good greenkeeper has been

reprimanded, and some indeed actually dismissed, for obeying management instructions, often given to them in writing. A lawsuit for wrongful dismissal is scant compensation for losing not only a job and possibly a house, but the link with a course to which the victim has given a section of his life in terms of dedication and enthusiasm, so it is no wonder that fewer and fewer good men are willing to stand up and put their jobs on the line - and why should they!

For too long advice has been aimed at the converted, who are often relatively powerless to implement it. In greenkeeping, very rarely does one isolated treatment achieve a dramatic solution. It is more the case that sound routine measures prevent the problem arising.

There is an old Scottish adage relating to wear, to the effect that if all the golfers could be got off the course altogether, it would always be in perfect order. While this may be humourously meant and impracticable, there is nevertheless a measure of truth in it.

**M**embership of golf clubs may not actually have increased, in total, dramatically in the past 25 years but not only today do all the members now play - and all the year round too - but they play more frequently. Scotland excepted, in the not so distant past, save in holiday periods, mid-week play was greatly reduced and winter play virtually unknown, save on links courses, except for a handful of hardy enthusiasts and exiled Scots! Not only is there now more traffic from members, but too many clubs are increasingly reliant on the financial returns from massive invasions by golfing societies and visitors. Figures of £100,000 per annum as 'green fee' revenue are no longer unheard of - indeed very few even 'unremarkable' clubs take much less than half this amount and think nothing of it. Some of this revenue may go back into the course - but most is used to keep subscriptions down, thus hiding the effect of the increasing costs required to maintain increasing standards all the year round, but at the expense all too often of course condition.

For too long the emphasis on course presentation has been influenced directly and indirectly by the professional Tour, whose members play no competitive golf in this country for more than six months of the year - and the most difficult six months at that! Too much is sacrificed to the urgent demands for courses to be 'all right on the night' - no matter what this costs in serious course deterioration later - as a critical examination of the current condition of far too many of the venues for the main events on this seasons golfing calendar will confirm. Peaks are always preceded and followed by troughs. If winter play is so vital - and we play golf under 'winter' conditions for more months than under summer ones, then we must encourage winter (or all the year round) grasses to dominate by correct management and eschew annual meadow grass which is satisfactory for perhaps five months of the year at most.

If greenkeepers are pressurised into tarting up courses, not just for major events but even for those on the club calendar, then they cannot also produce all-year excellence, under our climatic and budgetary restraints. We thus come to the crunch - that the problem lies with direction and not with management.

Something has to be done about the trend of non-member golfers, soon to exceed in total the numbers of club members. They are subject to few disciplines and have no long term interests, in all year round condition of the courses that they visit. The provision of additional facilities for them, I will return to in a future article. However it is the limitation of traffic on existing courses to which we must bend our minds.

**C**risis induced by the effects of prolonged droughts such as 1989 (and 1976) may concentrate a few minds but given the amazing resilience and natural recovery of our native turf, it is not long before the causes return and with them, the inherent problems. There can indeed be only one deduction. The first step to improving the all-year round playing condition of our courses is to eliminate Green Committees and the sec-

ond is to improve greenkeeping education at all levels and the third to limit traffic.

Green Committees were never a good idea but worked in the past, especially when they effectively consisted of one 'amiable dictator', but essentially they are a relic of the days when greenkeepers were poorly educated, willing stalwarts, thinking nothing of getting on with a day's work after mowing eighteen greens with a hand pushed Certes. Today Green Committees are all too often a way in which misguided but determined new entrants to the game

can achieve the power to produce course conditions which suit their game and their television-induced ideas of what quality standards are all about - failing to realise that there is total incompatibility between such artificial standards and all year round playability. This is not to denigrate the efforts and motives of some devoted members fulfilling a thankless task, merely to comment that they have had almost to a man no training to carry out what is an increasingly complex and technical task. Constant change is even worse, as individuals fight to impose their ideas in the short term of office available to them, and a clash with sound men with a lifetime's experience in course management is inevitable. There must be a change to a permanent management structure of professionally qualified individuals and this team should include

the Head man or course manager, but not the professional (any more than the catering manager or steward, as they are not involved and have their own spheres of responsibility).

Then and only then, can a course management policy document be drawn up and continuity of both policy and management assured.

There are of course many ways in which winter playing conditions can be improved and wear reduced, other than by reducing numbers of players. These vary from routine management, sensibly but rigorously carried out without excessive interference from outside factors, to special measures. Those experienced managers presenting their links courses for such events as the Open Championship pride themselves that they could take the Open on their course at any time given six weeks warning, but for the rest of the circus even six months is

not enough! Tarting up is not for them!

Special measures vary from sensible appreciation of the factors causing problems to very long term planning. Golf Architects have, especially in the past decade, taken traffic very much into consideration, in thinking of alternative wide walk-off points in contrast to a single line between flanking greenside bunkers; alternative tee positions, even to the extent of siting them left and right of the previous green; and in controlling planting or advocating major clearance of en-



croaching trees to improve light and ventilation.

**T**here is some scope on most inland courses for systematic woodland management to get air to turf and so reduce disease and discourage massive annual meadow grass invasion, in itself one of the poorest wearing grasses but admittedly one of the quickest to recover.

Paths are really no answer, they merely transfer the problem to the end of the path. I have seen paths off tees extending further and further into the fairway, until eventually older members were hard pushed to reach turf off the tee!

Banning trolley's in winter is always unpopular but necessary, not because the wheels do the harm but because those towing trolleys always follow one line like sheep. This is why arguments about tyres and ground

pressure and related compaction in defending buggies are so irrelevant. If the offending vehicles spread their routes widely the damage would be less, but necessarily and inevitably they converge on the most vulnerable areas, off tees; around average drive-landing areas; approaches and around greens. This is why I hope we never see the buggy situation which occurs in so many (if not all) American courses, where the only answer to course damage has been to build hard roads all round the course to which buggies are physically confined, which leads to rounds lasting five hours and more. It is also worth considering that if, when trolleys are banned, caddies replace them, then we get a double set of wearing feet!

**T**hose responsible for the direction of club management and course presentation must balance the advantages of the revenue from non-members (visitors and society) golf against the problems of extra wear and sadly disproportionately greater damage through both lack of proficiency and understanding of the rules. High scores are often directly related to greater punishment of the course, and there is a case to be argued that the whole of the extra revenue should be diverted to repair work and remedial measures, instead of, as is so often the case the bulk being used to

keep subscriptions from rising in direct proportion

to costs. Any course in any given year can only take so much punishment, that is why we must restrict the number of rounds and have not only a balanced financial budget, but a balanced ecological one as well.

In the end however, there is no substitute for sound greenkeeping principles and an even greater need for correct independent education coupled with the establishment of a uniform interpretation by the ever increasing number of training colleges of what is at best a confusing and ambiguous syllabus. Equally, these courses must be open to non-greenkeepers for although we would all wish to do away with greens committees it is inevitable that even if they are reduced in size (to only one!) that the real power will always tie with the members and not the clubs employees.