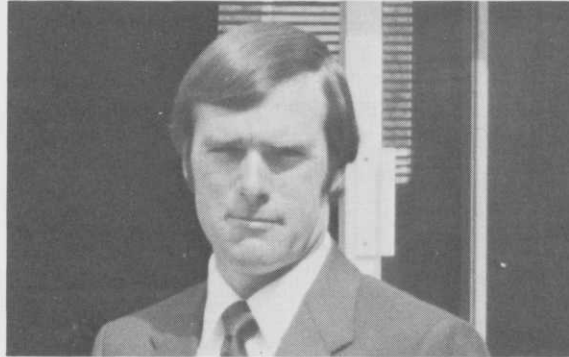


In·My·Opinion

Chris Kennedy



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In Scotland, we pride ourselves on our education programme, which follows the SCOTEC syllabus. In my opinion, however, there is a missing link in the 'Fine Turf' part of this education programme. Students are being well advised on the technical side but, in the field, head greenkeepers and course managers do not have enough time to spend with apprentices.

In most cases, this is not through choice, but thrust upon them by golf club committees, boards of management or whoever is holding the purse strings.

When I started in golf course management 22 years ago, I was lucky enough to come into it at a time when mechanisation meant that the cutting cylinder was propelled, but you still had to push the mower. If you were an apprentice, it could be six months before you were allowed near a green with a Push Certes. You then had to learn to cut in a straight line and set the machine properly.

Training in the 1960s might not have been so technical, but I certainly feel that the courses were not so heavily played and the head greenkeeper or course manager had more time to spend with younger members of staff.

Because we are in the leisure industry, courses are generally very busy. The biggest outlay is wages, so if staff at least understand or preferably play the game of golf, then this is not only to the head greenkeeper's advantage, but also to the benefit of the apprentice. Greenkeeping, like golf itself, is a constant challenge.

You will never be completely satisfied with your course, nor will the players, as some like firm fast greens and some like slow, soft surfaces.

It is for this reason that I ask you, no matter what association you are a member of—be it SIGGA, EIGGA or the BGGA—and if you are taking on an apprentice to consider:

1. When did you last take an hour or two to explain the proper way to change and site new holes, taking into account wind and ground conditions, etc?
2. When did you look at the bunkers from a player's point of view—ie shape, contour and quality of raking—and ask yourself are there large hollows just where the ball normally lands?
3. Are your greens cut often enough?

When you are taking on an apprentice, is it because you have decided to increase your staff ratio or replace another apprentice who has finished his five years? Or is it because, a few years ago, you actually had a qualified man but, because of cut-backs or the need to purchase equipment, you were told to trim back your wage bill and the only members of staff who would make any decrease in monetary terms were journeymen?

Nowadays, do you find that the apprentice has to take on jobs from his first few days of service that he would not normally be tackling for quite a few months and, even then, under your supervision? Because you are under pressure from the greens

management committee, general members of the club, consultant agronomists or keeping your hi-work equipment in a good state of repair, you just do not have the time to spend with him.

If this situation is true and you also trained the chap that the apprentice is working with, then you end up with a 'blind leading the blind' situation. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening at some clubs and then the head greenkeeper leaves and to save even more cash, the club appoints the first assistant to head greenkeeper and maybe he is not ready to take on the post.

Head greenkeepers and course managers should take a good look at their staffing requirements and if they are inadequate tell their clubs so.

You might get no reaction, but put your case properly and tell them that not only are they not getting the best out of their staff, but from you also. Prove to them that they are on the road to financial disaster because when a golf course gets to a low standard nobody wants to play it and it takes a lot of time, effort and extra money to bring it back again.

Finally, I would like to wish you all a successful season, especially Walter Woods and his staff at St Andrews for a great Open.

Naturally, I hope that SIGGA meetings with EIGGA and the BGGA are fruitful and of benefit to all greenkeepers. It is far better that we are united in matters such as training, staffing and matters of common interest to the game of golf.