

Editorial Comment

Communication is the answer

Struck by the wide variety of misinformed comment I hear from many Club members on golf course maintenance (and aren't they all experts), I am prompted to ask one simple question: Are you getting your money's worth? With few exceptions, the answer depends on how well the green committee relate with the greenkeeper.

The norm for admission to green committee status often seems to be coercion, with the sometime carrot of Club captaincy perhaps an attraction, though all too often the incumbent knows little or nothing about agronomy, course management or course architecture. How then can that weakness in the chain – knowledge – be overcome in order that the green committee man may participate effectively in an on-going maintenance programme which will continue long after he is done with committee life?

This is not the problem it seems, for the answer – practiced and preached by all effective managers – is communication.

Visiting Letchworth Golf Club, where Duncan McGilvray is the course manager, I was impressed by one of the best structures I've seen yet, where Duncan works not in isolation but as an equal in golfing terms. He eats lunch in the dining room, talks with most of the members both on and off the course and enjoys regular dialogue with the Club secretary and his course liaison officer – a one on one discourse – as well as playing the course regularly and being active at meetings. The result is that he knows what members want.

The antithesis of this enlightened approach came to my attention at a northern Club where most members didn't know the head greenkeeper's name and where a bunch of low handicappers were exerting authority to toughen the course up to the detriment of the rank and file majority. The final outcome of this aggression has yet to surface, but with the head man listening to the few, my guess would be that his job could be on the line.

There are problems in having too many bosses and again Letchworth have it right. Members may button-hole Duncan with ideas but they know how the course is managed and that only declared policy can be implemented. Such policy is well documented and programmed long term. It not only works but can be seen to be working.

The weakness of an ineffectual green committee can manifest itself in another and even more insidious fashion when complaints fail to reach the ears of the head greenkeeper. I know of more than one case where silence reigned and resulted in a programme continuing in total disregard to the members' wishes. The end result, when called to explain the direction the course was heading, was that yet another greenkeeper – rightly protesting that he hadn't heard of such problems and where early communication would have diverted the bubbling volcano – was forced to look elsewhere for a job.

In advocating an enlightened approach to course management via the green committee it would be wrong not to highlight the sterling work carried out by the STRI agronomists. They do a grand job but are quite clearly overworked. An annual course visit is fine but when isolated problems loom large and time is not on their side, Clubs must pay for expert advice and get advice *fast*. The wise greenkeeper will know not only his own course but those around him and will be able to guide his committee. If there is a moral to all this it is a simple one – communication wins friends and influences people and the good course is one where regular informed dialogue between green chairman and greenkeeper takes place. Added to this might be the truism that is much in fashion these days: a green committee should consist of an odd number... and three is too many!

DAVID WHITE



Flying Divots

An appreciation of what is not always appreciated

Gloomy outlook for some new golf course projects

As predicted in 'Flying Divots' in April, a report issued by Savills, the estate agents associated with pricey country estates and 'high rent' property in Belgravia or the like, estimates that about 30 golf course cum hotel sites are in the hands of the receiver, with many more on the brink. That grandest of grand projects – Loch Lomond – with a budget variously estimated at between £45 – £60million and promoted as a rival to Gleneagles, is "in difficulties" and is now run by an accountancy firm. It is not alone, with developers now chided for having responded too soon to the 1989 R&A report predicting a need for 700 new courses by the end of the century. As we always guessed and is now confirmed by R&A Secretary, Michael Bonallack: 'it didn't mean you could build them anywhere'. Thus it now seems that some developers have egg on their faces for building on a grand scale in places clearly inappropriate – the biggest sin.

The secret dream of some Club members – that a Japanese consortium will offer umpteen millions for their course – is now a fairy tale and Greenkeeper International understands that one estate specialist has no less than 80 potential courses and 40 existing courses on its books with precious few buyers.

Those already built will of course survive and continue, but is there really much 'silly money' around any more, where debentures of £15,000 – £30,000 are demanded? Henry Cotton had the right idea – simple courses for beginners – and one wonders if perhaps the report should not have identified the prime candidate, who is clearly not yesterday's 'yuppie'.

■ **Some 104 years later**, the following from Sir Walter Simpson, author of 'The Art of Golf' still stands in good stead: "The vital thing about a hole is that it should either be more difficult than it looks, or look more difficult than it is. It must never be what it looks."

■ **Foreigners laugh** at we British and our obsession with the weather, but it is a subject that is catching. Now some American friends have taken to weather watching and as they flew in from the yellows and browns that mark California – still drought ridden after five years – remarked on the sudden and astonishing green-ness that is our home.

Not surprising really, as June drew to a close with what we believed was a record soaker. Don't believe it! Weather men claim that the monotonous downpours were 'nothing special', with things just feeling worse because we had some rain every day.