

When will they learn?

Recently, I was discussing the trends of today's greenkeeping with a friend of many years standing and observed that in my opinion greenkeeping was at a cross-roads and that the crisis seemed largely unrecognised, especially by those deciding policy. This despite the start made on *The Way Forward*. 'But you have been saying that at intervals for the past forty years' was his riposte.

This I admit was certainly correct, but on reflection so were the reasons for such pessimism. Greenkeeping seems to suffer from cyclic disasters, all too often repeating the errors of previous decades. So-called new ideas – many not even new but recycled – are pushed by commercial interests, without adequate trials and against all the rules of basic greenkeeping. When they produce predictable disasters they are quietly dropped. The victims may not repeat that mistake but often fall for the next ploy. So few learn from the expensively acquired experience of others.

Such gimmicks range from 'new' fertilisers, magic cures ('apply this potion and you do not need to aerate'), 'new' grasses, 'new' methods of construction or even 'new' machines. I was amazed to see one such new aerating machine recently which was a carbon copy of a similar one which failed more than a decade ago. Why? because it took a week to aerate one green and the work can be done much better today by Vertidrain.

Too few with influence listen to experienced head greenkeepers let alone advisers. Too many seminars are chock full of irrelevant ideas and total heresies. Now we even have moves to train golf professionals to be course managers. Hopefully as the recommendations of *The Way Forward* are implemented we may see some improvement.

In the sixties it was gross over-use of complex NPK fertilisers. Several companies fought me – often unfairly – and where are they now? More to the point, nearly every fertiliser firm advises and supplies nitrogen only or 'no phosphate' fertilisers for greens. Yet we still see soil analyses being pushed as a useful guide as to what to apply. What does it matter if the phosphate levels are shown as very low if the grass is the right grass? If there are problems, the odds are it is not due to manurial deficiencies.

In the seventies, with increased numbers of courses installing automatic irrigation (pop-ups), but with no one realising it was fatally easy to over-water by merely turning a dial, the problem was over-watering. The British Turf Irrigation Association was set up and as instigator and founder member I tried to get better education and better equipment. Again, some unrepentant firms refused to listen – one even went so far as to say they had decided to assassinate my character to force me out of business – as I would not support their views. The top man who made that rash statement is no longer with the company!

Today most course managers, greenkeepers and chairmen of green pay at least lip service to the principle that 'overwatering is the cardinal sin of greenkeeping', made by that doyen of American greenkeeping, Al Radco.

In the eighties, the main problems were the use of wrong grasses in a feverish pursuit of colour, at the expense of 'traditional' playing surfaces. Penncross, introduced in the States to replace Bermuda grass in hot arid States, was blazoned as the grass to end all grass. Where is it now? It cannot legally be sold, though its successors can, but they are just as problem-ridden. All have severe winter dormancy, all pluck up badly with traffic, all produce thatch second to none and all suffer more from disease (from *Fusarium* to *Ophiobolus* patch) than any other. All these faults were clear to see on a recently televised English tournament. Yet they still have defenders – usually those from the other side of the Atlantic – whose experience of Northern European greenkeeping conditions is even less than mine of American!

I hear now that one much publicised venture is to kill off its Penncross fairways and resow with ryegrass – ryegrass, ye Gods! Do they not realise (and there are plenty of notoriously bad courses to prove it) that ryegrass – even the so-called dwarf varieties – never forms a close knit turf and with lush leafy lies control on the ball is impossible. The end result is top spin, players moaning they cannot stop the ball on the green, and then on goes the water. 'Oh, but it stays green in drought', say its advocates. Words fail me!

In recent years I suppose the worst heresies are connected with construction. Pure sand greens are extolled as the latest panacea for all ills. The concept, lifted straight from desert conditions where enormously high levels of irrigation are needed to keep the grass alive – even in fact to cool it – has as much relevance to Northern European conditions as caviar to starving Africans. For one thing, we simply are not going to have the water to keep them alive.

We see geotextile membranes used as the blinding layer over drainage car-



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pets – tolerable with pure sand, but with a sand/soil mix resultant silting up and flooding are predictable and inevitable – and we have known this for well over 20 years. But that doesn't stop some designers using them, despite categoric bans from the STRI and the USGA Green Section.

We see wall-to-wall irrigation quite unnecessarily installed – the only justification being to flatter a course on which a televised tournament is staged. The cost is astronomical, but even if money were no object, what is the point of a watering system with no water? Extraction is exceeding replacement over much of the South East and severe restrictions on 'frivolous' use are inevitable. Think on, you developers, before wasting money on a potential white elephant!

There are many, many other examples of the proven errors of yesteryear being blindly repeated today. Perhaps the cardinal sin of greenkeeping should be the failure to learn from the previous mistakes of others. Admittedly, commercial firms backing wrong horses do sometimes go to the wall and greenkeepers may lose their jobs, (often when it should really have been those ordering the disastrous treatment) but the real sufferers are our golf courses. Nature is very forgiving and grass very resilient. It is the basic tenet of greenkeeping that the botanical character of the grass cover (turf) of any area is determined by two factors: the natural environment (soil; weather; altitude; drainage) and the 'management' given to it, ranging from traffic to fertilisers. If these are constant, the quality of the turf – good or bad – will not alter, but if these factors change then so will

the grass. It changes for the worse far more easily and quickly than it improves for the better; and of course the recovery is linked with reversing the effects of wrong management. If acid land is limed (as was the problem in the forties as a result of post-war farming influence and advice) then it will be many, many years before the effects disappear and positive reversal: eg using powder sulphur, is necessary. This, in passing, we may be forced to do as a result of progressive bans on persistent worm killers by our E.C. masters – and who wants a none persistent one!

Frankly, with so many misguided treatments being reversed, often after several years (before the connection between the treatment and its disastrous effect was made), the poor grass doesn't know whether it is punched, bored or hem-stitched and may give up the unequal struggle. In other cases the desirable grasses have been so comprehensively destroyed that relying on natural regeneration demands more patience than those in charge of today's golf can accept.

It is fully accepted that golf courses have never before been subject to such pressures, not only caused by traffic and wear but by players demanding and expecting perfection for 365 days each year.

What is certain is that golf as we know it – backed by what for want of a better term we might call traditional greenkeeping – will not survive the massive onslaught which results from those with scant knowledge of the problems mistakenly perceiving that golf is now big business, with demand exceeding supply and a dearth of experienced men at all levels. A sure-fire situation to bring maggots out of the woodwork.

Do not dismiss this as the natural pessimism of a septuagenarian but more as a suggestion to look very carefully at most of today's instant cures – too many of which are on the same lines as advising amputation and a wooden leg as a sure-fire cure for ingrowing toenails.

It is not just a question of saying that the old ideas are best. It certainly does not mean rejecting – without a carefully controlled examination – any new idea. But it does mean acceptance of the fact that if the game of golf is not to be unrecognisably altered from the way it has been played for over 400 years, and get into the wrong hands, then all of us at all levels of management and advice must agree that if we are to continue to 'play the game along the ground and not largely in the air', and to play year round, then only our native grasses will produce the requisite conditions to make this possible. As one experienced course manager said to me recently, 'they are destroying our game', the sad thing being that so few of those pushing bad ideas have the slightest idea of the results of following their advice.

Please do remember that there is very little new in greenkeeping – only better or quicker ways of doing it – and it has all been seen before. So check and avoid repeating the often very expensive mistakes of others.



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