

# Lessons to be learned

Post mortems have only two useful functions: to identify the cause of death so that future mortality can be avoided and to bring wrong-doers to justice. The corpse in the case of Royal Birkdale was *Poa annua* and the verdict accidental death!

What caused such consternation was not so much the admittedly disappointing appearance of the greens, which seemingly mesmerised many of the players and gave cause for much self-pity – although scores were low and birdies were flying everywhere on the last day – but the crop of rash and ill-considered statements emanating from the mouths of those least qualified to comment.

Such professionals, it seems, consider that expertise in only one aspect of a complicated game gives them the right to opine on all matters agronomic and the end result was a rash of 'instant cures' which the national press were only too pleased to leap upon and publish prominently. These were seen in some quarters, quite erroneously in my view, as an indictment against current British greenkeeping practices.

There are always two sides to a coin, and it is no secret that Royal Birkdale is a members' Club catering to rank and file play over 52 weeks every year. But the course is also an Open Championship venue and the Club must have some input. Did the Club abdicate responsibility one wonders, what caused it to happen, what led to the problem, how can it be avoided? I was in a mood to ask questions and quizzed many for non-emotive answers.

Turning first to the Sports Turf Research Institute, advisers to the R&A on The Championship and agronomists to the Club, I was disappointed not to gain some insight, but was told that the Institute are in active discussion with the R&A and will issue an explanatory document in due course. Perhaps this is right and proper, but the world of golf should not be kept waiting too long and one hopes that the report will not be a whitewash, for greenkeepers tell me they desperately want answers.

No-one was more aware of the problems which have plagued this particular course for The Open than Jim Arthur, for nearly two decades the consultant agronomist to the R&A's Championship Committee and even before that when – in his own words – he attempted unsuccessfully between 1946 and 1952 to advise the Club to change their greenkeeping system.

He told of over-reactions (natural enough in the light of their current knowledge) to the disastrous effects of over enthusiastic application of the acid theory to a links course without effective irrigation in the mid-1930s, which swung fertiliser treatment to the other extreme with the gross over-use of complete (NPK) fertiliser. This continued unabated after the War, and indeed even for a few years after the similar 1971 disaster and is confirmed by soil analyses, showing some of the highest phosphate levels on record. The soil under Birkdale's greens could in fact be legally sold as fertiliser!

The inevitable result of such very fertile conditions means annual meadow grass dominance. Jim Arthur expanded: "this may be tolerable if the enemy of good greenkeeping is not overstressed, e.g. by shaving greens to achieve faster speeds, but a change to austere greenkeeping, as practiced on our best links courses, literally kills the *Poa annua*."

by DAVID WHITE



**'This disaster – which is not too strong a word for it – may yet do good on three counts'**

– Jim Arthur

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– Neil Thomas

"This year the problem was exacerbated but not caused – just before The Open – by a sudden and severe drop in mowing height and related treatments to achieve faster speeds. There are also complicating factors in buried thatch creating stagnation and inhibiting deep root development. This disaster (which is not too strong a word for it) may yet do good on three counts.

"One – the apologists for annual meadow grass must surely accept that it is not capable of producing top conditions. It may be inevitable but it is not nice! Generously fed and watered, it may be satisfactory for members' golf in summer but in the UK we play more under winter than summer conditions.

"Two – the insatiable demand by the professionals for faster and faster putting surfaces must be curbed. There are other ways to speed up greens than shaving them to below an eighth – by use of turf rollers for example – and conditions are, after all, the same for all competitors.

"Three – the ignorance of nearly all top players about greenkeeping, which resulted in so many foolish pieces of advice as to cause and cure of this problem, is exposed and they must learn to keep quiet to avoid the scorn of those who do know".

Continuing further, Jim suggested the proposals mooted that the R&A should enforce standards are unrealistic, "because British Clubs are a law unto themselves and do not consider they have to take orders from anyone, in contrast to America, where the USGA take over completely and control management via the Green Section's agronomists, as well as administration of the course selected. Until that happens here, those trying to help can only rely on tact, often dealing with constantly changing committees, where the only common factor is the team work and close liaison – indeed friendship – between the course manager and the agronomist, without which I for one could never have got anything done".

"Perhaps", he concluded, "we may yet achieve the leadership in golf which is so lacking today – not because those guiding British golf do not realise the need for it but because of the jealously guarded independence of our Clubs. The greatest threat comes from the professionals who are increasingly imposing their standards on the game, yet are singularly uninterested outside their short playing season here and are increasingly out of touch with today's all year round UK greenkeeping problems and cures.

"At least the Royal and Ancient is making serious attempts and generous contributions towards better course conditions but can at best guide and encourage – it cannot impose its will. The need above all and at all levels is for better educa-



at Royal Birkdale for The Open Championship



tion, even more of professionals and those tipping their caps to them, than of greenkeepers”.

Turning from Jim Arthur, I asked Neil Thomas for comment from BIGGA's viewpoint. Neil suggested that “the structure is now in place to ensure a uniformity of approach and the soon to be appointed Technical Panel of the Joint Golf Course Committee should be charged with the task of laying down guidelines and setting standards for the future maintenance and preparation of The Championship courses.

“Naturally there must be full co-operation with each Club and the interests of Club members will be a vital matter for consideration. Long term planning is essential and progress should be monitored by the Panel. The time span before The Open returns to a particular course allows the implementation of such planning. Over a period of time there would be substantial improvements in the condition of these courses and much relieving of pressure on the course managers concerned. The Association firmly believes that whilst there may be historic reasons for present inadequacies in standards, they must now be tackled and resources made available from within the game to ensure long term planning takes place”.

Commenting on the specific criticisms levelled at the greens of Royal Birkdale, BIGGA's Executive Director pointed out “that the problems of this particular championship course have been well known and documented over a number of years. As such, criticism of the present head greenkeeper is not justified – he worked within established guide-lines in presenting the course for The Open, but in terms of preparing the greens he was clearly not working from an ideal base.”

As a final comment, Neil Thomas added that within the ranks of BIGGA there is much practical knowledge that can be brought to bear which will enhance the future presentation of championship courses. It is hoped that the new Technical Panel will make full use of this knowledge and that the game as a whole will quickly recognise the validity of the comment made in ‘The Way Forward’ ...that BIGGA ‘must become the central reference point for all other golfing bodies on matters pertaining to greenkeepers and greenkeeping’.

Speed greed, it seems, is the main and immediate culprit in this saga and it is sad to see so many of our erstwhile wonderful links and heathland courses losing the character of their greens due to such shaving tactics – often for months on end – in the insane chase for slick and trick, when in the end they finish being slower and trouble-prone. Why should Club members suffer (assuming they want to retain the ideals of firm, fast, true greens all year round) merely to satisfy a handful of not very far-thinking professionals, most of whom couldn't care less about any course the day after they have finished playing their tournament?

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