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■ Entering discussion 'beyond argument' ■ Height of common sense

■ May I address Mr Gray (February letters) through your columns, thus?

In your letter in Greenkeeper International you felt that you must enter the fray. I am glad you did, because apathy is one of the greatest enemies of greenkeeping and I am sure you are sincere in your beliefs.

I am equally sure that people like Jim Arthur, who by the way clearly states his view 'beyond argument', in his October article, Steve Isaac of the STRI, Jack McMillan and even Neil Whitaker of Woburn (see February issue), are also sincere in their beliefs; in fact Neil Whitaker's experiences seem to contradict yours entirely. Anyway, the pace of any putting surface is a personal interpretation and comes second, in my opinion, to smoothness.

Your comments on cutting height are interesting and the first part I agree with entirely. On the second, I note you say that your surfaces are firm but not solid and unyielding. Therefore my point on accuracy still stands. As you seem to use a ruler and straight edge, you obviously do not put much emphasis on accuracy. I use a height of cut setter which is both very simple to use, and very accurate. My staff regularly set all three Paladins and all three units on each of our two Jacobsen GreenKing triplex mowers, to an accuracy of 1/10mm.

Even with 20/20 vision your method is inherently inaccurate and prone to operator error.

As far as your third point goes, all recent (say the last ten years), STRI research and trials suggest that fescues thin out when mowing heights drop much below 5mm for any extended period of time. Concerning winter cutting, I cannot agree more, and never raise the mowing height to more than 6mm.

Finally I prefer to work with millimetres, as I feel the sooner we accept the metric scale, the less painful it will be in the long run. I do not, by the way, object to you or anyone else using sixteenths, as long as you stick to this unit, and do not jump about between eighths, quarters, halves, thirty secondths, and even sixty fourths!

I like to learn about greenkeeping techniques, and enjoy nothing more than a good chin wag with a fellow greenkeeper. I have learnt a great deal from such face to face discussions. I do, however, change my mind if I find that I am wrong. Do you?

PN BERTINSHAW

Head Greenkeeper, Royal Norwich Golf Club

■ I find it necessary to reply to the letter of Mr D Gray (February issue) with particular reference to greens mowing heights, if only to voice

some well-proven common sense on behalf of those professionals in our business who seek to restore, by way of a corrective programme, or maintain the quality in the turf which the game of golf inherently requires but which is still so sadly lacking up and down the country.

Surely Mr Gray cannot be seriously suggesting that the large number of S-L-O-W greens he has experienced is a direct result of normal summer mowing heights (ie. 3/16"). No, surely he must agree that the basic reasons for said slow greens lie elsewhere, in all probability with the dominance of well fed and watered *Poa annua* in a poorer state of health than his own, being mown at 3/16" possibly only three or four times per week! Mr Gray is well aware that well managed fescue/bent greens do not require drastic mowing measures to produce fast, true, firm surfaces for any class of player.

He is also aware of alternative interim measures should greater speed of roll be deemed necessary, infinitely better indeed than the severely detrimental effects of close mowing on a fine fescue population in particular, a widely accepted fact especially when combined with the abrasive effects of wear and tear from the intensity of play consistent with the majority of courses nowadays.

Mr Gray's diagnosis here is plainly incorrect and the very fact that he is mowing at 1/8", sometimes, it appears, even lower, and twice a day at that, is indicative of a sward lacking certainly in fine fescues and which may contain a percentage of bent species interspersed with a dominance of *Poa annua* and perhaps some patches of Yorkshire Fog. I am assuming here, of course, that the head greenkeepers on the courses under Mr Gray's control do indeed carry out this severe mowing regime. They may however make their own adjustments to any formal programme and hence protect and maintain fine species present.

He may well have firm greens but his mowing heights inform us that although, yes, he has attained a thatch free turf, possibly well drained, he has gone no further towards true quality nor cannot with such close mowing practices. He has taken what has been seen as the "easy" way to fulfil a requirement or trend, the quest for speed, to the detriment of the finer species and consequently the production of all year round quality surfaces, at the same time forsaking the correct turf resilience so important for surface ball reaction so typical of fescue/ bent turf.

Jeff Perris's statement comes to mind here when he said "it is unfair to condemn the men with *Poa annua* greens when you know that one of the main contributory factors is the pressure from members to mow too closely," and here we have a turf manager willingly carrying out such practices! Interestingly, Mr Gray does not mention grass species or relevant percentages present or indeed any overseeding programme for the golf courses under his control, although he does mention the case of the bowling greens which are closed for half the year.

This point is significant, as is the fact that Mr Gray still found it necessary to oversee his bowling greens for the past three years in the autumn despite the fact as he states, "The bowling greens still retained the high percentage of fine grasses found at the start of the season", following his close mowing regime. This obvious contradiction begs the question, why then the seemingly needless expense of overseeding? If this does not represent a serious indictment of faulty mowing practices, I don't know what does!

Why put whatever fine turf species you may have (or have recently sown) on golf greens under unnecessary physiological stress? Mr Gray must be aware of the adverse effects of extremely close mowing on plant rooting capability particularly at prime periods such as late



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Letters

■ GCSAA: shape of things to come ■ Courses' biggest compactors

summer and early autumn, not to mention the general weakening of the plant through resultant excessive leaf tissue removal, enhancing the abrasive effects of wear and tear and the inevitable invasion of *Poa annua* on the fine turf which is so essential for the game of golf. In no other sport is the turf species so critical to the playing of the game.

Of course if *Poa annua* dominance is accepted then all of this pales into insignificance due to the inherent capabilities of this opportunist weed which can never produce acceptable surfaces for year round play!

Coming to Mr Gray's point regarding cutting height trials on bent grass plots at St Ives in the thirties, surely the fact that the STRI (as he himself acknowledges) have long since documented and published the shortcomings of excessively close mowing practices on fine turf, particularly fescues, merely highlights the obvious inadequacy of said trials in relation to the practicalities we now know.

This re-assessment of past 'advice' in the light of modern technology and understanding of pedological aspects, for instance in fine turf production and maintenance, is not new. It is not that long ago the STRI were advising NPK compound fertilisers for general use on fine turf! Like all research and development programmes, some previous findings or conclusions, although not all, have to be abandoned as progress is made and naturally the same analogy applies to old books on greenkeeping or golf books containing chapters on course upkeep, where quite often only a percentage of the information therein is of any practical value, either then or now. Certain basic principles remain true however (ie. the need for well-drained, well structured, un-compacted soils of low fertility).

A cutting height over the winter period of approximately 5/16" is the normal on fescue/bent turf for obvious reasons and perfectly suitable surfaces ensue. Contamination with ryegrass patches of course spoil good, clean surfaces and necessitate physical removal. Incidentally I have seen perfectly good surfaces produced over winter on fescue greens with an occasional light roll being the only requirement following a raising of mowing height to 5/16" in October as growth fails. The only 'coarse growth' I have experienced on putting surfaces is from coarse grasses and as they are weeds by definition in this situation, they consequently require removal!

In conclusion I consider it important for the restoration of British golf courses in general (re. The Way Forward) that such heretical writings be refuted by all responsible professional people in golf course management (as Neil Whitaker found his cost in the same issue of Greenkeeper International).

How can we expect our young ambitious greenkeepers, the course managers of tomorrow, to gain a clear understanding of the interrelation and timing of the many and varied, yet essential, cultural practices in the quest for

high quality playing surfaces if consistent correct advice is not forthcoming, especially when in the vast majority of cases it is not the maintenance of such surfaces that is initially required but the reclamation of the fine turf species, something which sadly only a limited number of Course Managers are seriously engaged in, let alone have achieved.

J S PHILP

Links Superintendent, Carnoustie Golf Links Management Committee, Carnoustie, Angus

■ I was fortunate in winning a competition run by Maxwell Hart Ltd, the prize being a trip to New Orleans to visit the GCSAA convention. I thought I would put pen to paper, or rather finger to keyboard, and put down some of my thoughts and reactions

I thought the exhibition was really good, my first reaction being that it was no bigger than IOG Peterborough, but then it struck me that the Stateside show is 100% golf course equipment and materials, unlike 'our' show, which covers all sports and even kid's playground gear!

If you can imagine a show with about the same number of stands as IOG but held indoors in just one huge centre that has three very large halls, a large ballroom and umpteen meeting rooms then you will get an idea of the size of the new Orleans Convention Centre.

I saw many new products and I guess that we may never see some of these on this side of 'the pond'. Equally, there were many new products which I was told would be launched in the UK in September – it was good to get this preview of things to come.

As for New Orleans itself, what can I say? It's a town and a half! Nightlife that really has life and food that is so Tasty it deserves a capital 'T'! Though viewed with some trepidation, I even enjoyed alligator tail on a stick! However, like many American towns and cities, we were warned to keep to the main streets, for the deserted side streets were places where one walked in peril of mugging or worse!

The weather was unbelievable for February, with highs of 80°F and 100% humidity. I dread to think what the summer atmosphere must be like. It rained one night with a fall of four inches, though next day everywhere was totally dry. I got off the 'plane at Gatwick in my short sleeved shirt and found ice on the handrails in the airport. What a shock!

Final thought – what a well organised event.

JOHN ATKINS

Course Manager
Chestfield Golf Club, Kent

■ Whilst I agree with the contents of Jonathan Tucker's February article on trolleys (being a 'bag carrier' myself), I must point out that there are minus points in carrying your bag, especially across the green.

As we all know, by far the biggest compactor on the golf course is the golfer. When

you walk the whole of your weight at one time is on the ball of your foot, an area of approximately five square inches. This, for a man weighing 12 stones, works out at a pressure of $168 \div 5 = 34$ pounds per square inch. A carrying type golf bag together with a full set of clubs, waterproofs and umbrella can weigh up to 20 pounds – adding another 4 pounds per square inch to the compacting pressure.

This is worse from the compaction point of view than taking a trolley across the green, though I hasten to add I am not for one minute advocating this practice!

Whilst on the subject of trolleys, I think some manufacturers should take another look at their designs. The weight distribution benefit of a wide wheel is completely lost if the wheel is not lying flat on the ground. In fact, if it is running on it's edge it probably does more marking than the old fashioned narrow wheels. Some types, especially folding ones, tend to have their wheels running on edge.

I am in full agreement of the development of alternative tees to vary the routes from green to tee and hence spread the wear. However, I think it is vitally important that we make 'alternative' tees as properly constructed tees, approximately the same yardage and not 'winter' tees. 'Winter tees' usually mean a neglected, muddy piece of ground approximately 3 yards by 2 yards and 50 yards in front of the proper tee.

AG ELLIS

Chairman of Green, Royal St David's Golf Club, Harlech

• *Valid points certainly, especially that of archaic trolley design. Nevertheless, the real problem of trolley use remains that of constant 'same path' attrition. Worn areas and bare, often muddy, patches are always the unsightly result of such rigid flow patterns. Furthermore, carriers will always dump their bags at the earliest greenside opportunity.* –Editor.

■ Included in our 'wants list' of new machinery, tools and other accessories – deemed necessary in the annual assessment – one doubtful piece of equipment, namely a clocking in and out machine, was duly bought (I understand, from a company that had gone bust, which may prove something!) and laid to rest one wintry morning whilst we sat over lunch. "It looks nothing like the expected new 180", said someone, but there it looms, the 'thing' which now has pride of place on our bothy door, whirring away with a loud 'clonk' every minute of every hour of every day.

No one dares approach it: it rules and you don't mess with it. It seems to say 'You will now clock in on time and you will not sneak off thirty seconds early at night'. We are three 'amazed, never late' greenkeepers and now wonder if we are the only greenkeepers in Britain with a time-clock monster as another master?

STUART MACKIE

Cowdenbeath, Fife, Scotland