# Letters

■ May I express my appreciation to both ICI and BIGGA officials for the hospitality shown to me during the recent ICI Premier Greenkeeper award held at Aldwark Manor.

I felt this to be a real learning experience and would urge all greenkeepers to support these educational competitions.

Finally, may I again congratulate David Whitaker on his success and wish all finalists good luck in the future.

**Tim McCreadie** Oundle, Peterborough

■ I feel I must enter the fray regarding the controversy arising from the cutting heights declared by George Barr at Ham Manor (October Greenkeeper International), and the subsequent letters which appeared in December.

First, I must come clean and admit to being a long-time Jim Arthur fan, though not always totally agreeing with everything he says, as will be seen from the following.

Reading your article, I considered it the most sensible and honest I had ever read since first becoming interested in this profession. I control eight golf courses and seven bowling greens and every one is managed in a very similar way to that outlined by George Barr, including height of cut. The only real difference is that my top dressing is an 80/20 mix of medium/course sand and sterilised soil, though I have used a straight sand in the past on numerous courses in Ireland, (where good soil is at a premium) with great success. My findings suggest that a medium/course sand, rather than a medium/fine, is infinitely superior as a green top dressing, with peat a definite no-no.

Returning to the point re Barr's seasonal cutting at 1/8" Messrs Bertinshaw and Jones suggest that this is not good greenkeeping practice, as does the STRI and, apparently, Jim Arthur. Indeed, judging by the number of courses I play with s-l-o-w greens, there are a large number of other greenkeepers who share this view.

Let me state a few facts on cutting height. First: If a basic maintenance programme is unsound, with soft, spongy surfaces produced as a result, then bench setting becomes irrelevant, as the mower will obviously be 'sitting down' into a thatch layer when cutting. This 'sitting down' produces scalping when cutting heights are dropped, the results of which could be seen to dramatic effect last year on television.

Second: I have been cutting greens to 1/8" for 12 years now, only raising to 3/16" in winter, and have never experienced any problems **because the surfaces remain firm** thanks to a solid maintenance programme. During 1990 my five bowling greens at Northfield hosted the Scottish Ladies, Scottish Mens and Ladies Home Internationals over four weeks in July/August. Over that time, plus a gradual drop over the preceding weeks, they were cut at 3/32" twice a day with Paladins and still retained the same high percentage of fine grasses found at the start of the season. Our bowling greens have been overseeded for the past 3 years in Autumn with a 50/50 mix of browntop and Emerald creeping bent – yes, creeping bent – and this works very well because they are not played on in the winter.

Third: In his book Practical Lawn Care, published in 1939, R B Dawson of the STRI reveals the results of an experiment in cutting heights carried out at St Ives, summarised as follows: Two areas were cut at 1/8" and 3/8" respectively. First result: the long cut produced only 75% – 97% of grass clippings depending on seasonal variations. Conclusion – the shorter cut encourages more vigorous growth. Second result: After two full seasons the plot cut at 3/8" contained (having been sown with highland bent) 17.6% *Poa annua* and 6.3% weeds, with the plot cut at 1/8" containing 0.5% *Poa annua* and 2.1% weeds. Moss was slightly more common on the shorter cut. Other results showed that counts of shoots and tillers on the 1/8" cut were outnumbering those on the longer cut by nearly 2-1, thereby giving a much denser sward. One other interesting fact revealed that worm activity was three times greater on the longer cut.

This, remember, was back in 1939. I do not subscribe to the theory that because of heavier play nowadays things have changed. Certainly, there is a greater need for vastly improved aeration, but not for cutting heights.

One other point concerns winter cutting. Every old publication I have ever read on greenkeeping states categorically that grass should be cut regularly in winter. My experience certainly confirms that not cutting, or cutting too high or too infrequently, causes course growth and wet, soft patches prone to disease and damage.

Finally, I would take issue with Mr Bertinshaw over his comments on cutting height adjustment. Surely he can work with millimetres if he wishes, just as I and many others work in sixteenths of an inch, as we wish. If he cannot set a mower accurately using a ruler and straight edge then he apparently still has a bit to learn.

**Duncan Gray**
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**Something to say? Letters on all aspects of greenkeeping are welcomed. Send your correspondence to the editor, Greenkeeper International, 13 Firle Close, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2HL. We reserve the right to edit submissions.**

■ In order to avoid possible misinterpretation and confusion, I would like to observe that the otherwise excellent, informative (and condemnatory!) article by Tim Colclough on sand greens (January Greenkeeper International) is fatally marred by his failure to specifically differentiate between sand-only green constructions and those with 'sand based root zones'. Virtually all greens are now built with sand-based root zones, ie. sand/soil/peat; sand/fen soil; or even sandy links greens with the links sand ameliorated by natural build up of humus, as Tim correctly observes.

The recommendations and observations in his article, based on STRI research and practical observation, refer to **sand-only construction.** Even if followed, they cannot prevent severe and serious attacks of Ophiobolus (Take-all Patch) and eventually *Poa annua* dominance.

I must ask that all concerned realise that greens with root zones (however sandy and free draining) which incorporate a humus rich additive to act as a buffer or nutrient-retaining element should never be fed with phosphate or lime and only exceptionally with potash using only limited amounts of basically slow release nitrogen, or *Poa annua* invasion will be as rapid as it is extensive.

However, if omission of the qualification about sand only, as opposed to sandy humus-enriched root zones, was the result of an oversight, his qualification to the unarguable statement that "there is no place for pure sand greens in this country" except where there is "a complete lack of suitable local materials and a tight construction budget" is illogical and misleading. If money is short, why install a system which demands very intensive and expensive management to even postpone the inevitable disastrous end result? Furthermore, there are nationally available ideal sources (no monopoly of any one firm, though some are better than others) of suitably organic-rich light soils with very low clay and silt fractions for admixture with quality controlled sand at prices which add, at most, 1% to construction costs.

It is to be noted that the use of 'local soil', which I have long condemned as being expensive to extract and screen, unreliable, often contaminated and very rarely physically suitable, not to mention the restoration costs involved on site, is now "not advised by the USGA Green Section". Hopefully, we shall soon have an agreed specification for British and European green construction – if it can be agreed before the Germans (and their 'Greens') get theirs in first on the EC table – for if that happens the resultant problems and embargoes will be horrendous.

When German architects state that they want their courses to look like Disneyland (I quote verbatim) where will our Royal and Ancient sport still be played?

**Jim Arthur** Budleigh Salterton, Devon