



John Philp

John Philp says:

Head greenkeepers and course managers are encouraged: 'Be a master of your profession' and register for the Master Greenkeeper Certificate Scheme, a seemingly worthy qualification on offer to all head greenkeepers and course managers who are BIGGA members.

I am concerned, however, about the adequacy of the criteria as described for this intended 'standard of excellence'. Although in agreement with the principles of both educational, self advancement and the elevation of the greenkeeping profession in general, I remain sceptical, as I have from its inception, of the ability of the formula per se to accomplish the desired goal: that of being a widely recognised professional status for golf course managers and greenkeeping in general.

One can imagine a large number of greenkeepers achieving the 200 credits applicable to Stage One sooner or later, and no doubt many will also possess the necessary capability to pass the examination – given the syllabus – required for Stage Three. The vital yardstick however, to my mind, has to be involved in Stage Two where we have but scant information. I very much doubt whether a one-day, pre-arranged visit with preparatory guidelines set in advance, to 'ensure that correct management and maintenance practices are being implemented', is sufficient for a realistic assessment to be made. After all, this is the acid test, the only one where whatever knowledge, qualifications or years of experience a man may possess, together with implementation of professional skill in the field can be scrutinised. What real value, other than personal satisfaction or gain, has the fullest knowledge or the highest qualification in any industry unless it is applied correctly to produce an end result of true quality, which only then can merit professional rating. Acquired knowledge and relevant qualifications do not by any means guarantee professional skill!

Planned application of knowledge however, with or without qualification, allied to acute awareness, as well as quite a few other personal skills, mostly gained through experience, certainly can manifest themselves as professional skill with an end result to match!

I would suggest therefore that 3 or 4 non-arranged visits at different times of the year (with no guide-lines), would be a minimum requirement to assess the many and varied 'management practices', as well as special emphasis on areas such as construction and conservation to name but two, if not already on the agenda. One wonders who is going to weed out dubious aspirants in this all important area, so critical under the present formula, in the establishment of a true professional.

Further, I consider Stage Two to be particularly important at the present time as we still have a dearth of good course managers who are not only skilled in the art of greenkeeping but adept in the science of fine turf production, notwithstanding the crop of mainly younger greenkeepers who are 'grasping the nettle' – may their numbers continue to multiply. The mere fact that the single assessment is 'during the season of growth', does tend to impart the feeling that perhaps course preparation and presentation is the main aspect of on-course examination and not, as it should be, botanical composition!

Professional status surely cannot be applied unless quality golfing turf, which by definition dictates that it is largely composed of fine true perennial turf species (i.e. the fine fescue and or bent grasses) is offered, especially on putting surfaces whereby the true potential of a given site is realised or is being effectively managed towards this goal. This represents professionalism, requiring infinitely more skill than the mere, relatively simple, aspect of course presentation.

I well remember from some years back Jim Arthur's poignant

description, when he said, "Greenkeeping is essentially about botany and men". Meticulous preparation and presentation techniques are to no avail if botanical composition is ignored! Yes, we have to present a product – the golf course – to the paying customer, but it has to represent real value, not a wolf in sheep's clothing!

Many players are fooled by higher standards of presentation in evidence on most courses nowadays and often put aside the poor playing surfaces suffered, sometimes for as long as seven months of the year, as soon as summer growth permits meadow grass swards to appear acceptable. Comments passed with genuine intent, such as, 'the greens are coming on nicely now' abound up and down the country at this time, but unfortunately this false flattery more often than not bears no relation to the stark reality of the situation. You can only fool some of the people all of the time, and if the day ever comes when you can't fool any of the people at all a lot of other people are going to be found wanting.

I foresee a real danger of greenkeeping moving into the next millennium with the alarming situation of a succession of candidates in possession of a Master Greenkeeper Certificate yet actively managing, albeit well presented, *Poa annua* dominated turf, although perhaps 'going through the motions' of change to golfing turf but with little real commitment and purpose, probably fuelled by a lack of the required understanding to achieve the correct progression. What a hollow, totally meaningless qualification it would be if my fears materialise and indeed completely contrary to all publications and worthy professional advice from authorities in the game. I hope BIGGA sincerely wish to follow 'the professional way forward' and perhaps the executive director can allay my concern by confirming BIGGA policy with reference to Stage Two and publish at the same time the aspects of management constituting the 'guidelines', together with corresponding rating or 'scoring' and what safeguards, if any, are in place. I presume progression to Stage Three is not possible unless candidates are successful in Stage Two.

In closing, it is my opinion that a British Golf Course Standards publication is overdue, by which courses can be classified and given a rating relative to what they offer the paying customer, and although this may not be a direct responsibility of the Association I do think they should have an active involvement. This may just stir lower rated golf club administrations into much needed action and course investment. Equally essential is an in depth practical and administrative manual relating to golf course management and development
J S Philp, Links Superintendent, Carnoustie Golf Links Management Committee, Carnoustie, Angus, Scotland.

Neil Thomas says:

I am delighted to respond to John's comments and hopefully allay his concerns particularly with regard to Stage Two of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate. Progress to Stage Three is not possible until Stage Two has been successfully completed. Stage Two is therefore a very important aspect of the MGC and John's letter presents a timely opportunity for members generally to be made aware of just what is involved.

John touches briefly on Stages One and Three, as the main thrust of his concern relates to Stage Two and I will respond briefly on those stages. Knowledge, qualifications and experience are integral parts of the certification scheme and should not in any way be under-valued. The Association's efforts over the last five years have concentrated on improving the educa-

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tion and training available to greenkeepers, particularly through the 'approved colleges'. Today there is much evidence of greater co-operation with the colleges and of improved standards of both theoretical and practical training. The certification scheme from the outset has emphasised the need for education to be ongoing and continuing education was built into the scheme. Experience is another vital ingredient – many of our up and coming young greenkeepers need and will continue to need the wise counsel of these years.

Those points having been made I would agree that acquired knowledge and relevant qualifications do not guarantee professional skill. Certainly not every successful individual will put into practice in later years what he has learnt. Clearly the certification scheme had to ensure that sound use was being made of the knowledge gained and this could only be done at the place of work. The golf course visit is a vital part of the MGC and therefore necessitated very careful planning about how best to carry this out in a fair and meaningful way. Three or four unannounced visits at different times of the year would have presented practical and financial difficulties of some consequence, before considering the Club's reaction to such visits. The Master Greenkeeper working party determined that a planned, well-structured visit would eliminate as far as possible the subjective judgements which are always likely to reduce fairness.

It needs to be understood that the golf course assessors have been trained and are sufficiently experienced to recognise the difference between good preparation and presentation and the fundamental composition of the turf. I would suggest to John that to make composition of the turf the sole method of assessment is to take a very narrow view. The visit is also to determine the ability of the candidate to organise, to plan and to assess progress in the implementation of an agreed programme. It looks at relationships at the place of work and also examines the candidate's abilities as an initiator. Would it not therefore be inherently unfair to mark down or fail a candidate who has *Poa annua* on his greens when it may well be that he inherited a problem and is in any event seeking to reduce it as part of a planned programme?

I am happy to detail criteria applying for Stage Two within the nine relevant sections. Each area of assessment within a section is marked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent. Each section has a set pass mark. Within each section any area of assessment marked 3 or less is the subject of further consideration to ensure overall fairness to the candidate. The nine sections are as follows:

SECTION 1 – PRESENTATION OF THE COURSE: Presentation involves accuracy and tidiness of maintenance, siting, condition and playability of the whole area. It covers greens, tees, fairways, semi-rough, rough, bunkers, surrounds, pathways, furniture, hazards and clubhouse area.

SECTION 2 – STAFF ORGANISATION: In staff organisation the assessors should be looking for general attitude to work: from the golfers viewpoint, dress, welfare, accommodation and training programmes on and off site. This will require questions relevant to the adequacy of accommodation for working, dining and the general attitude to safety at work.

SECTION 3 – ORGANISATION OF SHEDS: Assessors should be concerned with general tidiness (not daily dirt), compliance with appropriate safety regulations regarding storage of tools and equipment, also the current state of repairs of building.

SECTION 4 – BUDGET MANAGEMENT: The wide range of vari-

ation and responsibility should be recognised in this section, but the least to be expected is that the budget has been prepared by the course manager as the basis for management discussion. The important elements are therefore responsibility for the budget within members (committee) limits. Lack of direct involvement with setting or servicing a budget by whatever means should be regarded as a disqualification.

SECTION 5 – RECORD AND STOCK CONTROL: In this area it is expected that all records required as a result of legislation are covered adequately. However, other records are necessary for achieving an adequate level of management. Accessibility of records to other staff should be taken into account where appropriate and therefore relevant questions should be asked. Diary, machine maintenance, stock inventory and chemical log are all important elements.

SECTION 6 – MANAGEMENT PARTICIPATION: In this area a course manager should play a major role in the decision making process of the club with regards the golf course. It is essential therefore that the relationship to management, the role within the committee and the ability/opportunity to submit reports and support them, are considered. Questions regarding the exact role of the course manager are therefore appropriate.

SECTION 7 – COURSE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME: In this area the candidate is expected to have recognised potential problems and to have drawn up a programme to correct or rectify them. This may involve a long term maintenance programme or a construction programme. Assessors will be expected to determine the relationship between the course manager's programme and the plans of the Club management committee, as well as the methods used in drawing it up. It is assumed that contractors providing relevant assistance would be brought in as required.

SECTION 8 – MACHINE AND IRRIGATION: Assessors should be looking for a planned replacement and maintenance programme. The course manager's influence in this is important. Also the operative condition of equipment should be considered, coupled with questions directed to seeking explanations for what is found.

SECTION 9 – GOLF: An ability to play golf is desirable, including a detailed knowledge of the requirements of golfers of varying standards. Questions should be directed towards relevant rules and surface requirements where playing abilities are irrelevant.

As a final comment, may I say how much I welcome John's thought-provoking observations, which remind all concerned of the importance of an ongoing assessment of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate Scheme. As I have said on many occasions, this is not an easy award to obtain – were it to be so the Scheme would be fundamentally flawed and devalued. It is designed to find the 'master' rather than a good course manager. Members can rest assured that BIGGA and the working party will continue to ensure that the Scheme is equitable for its members and the industry as a whole. It remains my belief that the education and training programmes now in place and those being planned, particularly the introduction of HND courses in golf greenkeeping this coming September, coupled with the Master Greenkeeper Certificate Scheme, will accomplish full professional recognition for greenkeeping and a real status for golf course managers in the years ahead.

Neil Thomas, Executive Director, BIGGA.



Neil Thomas

true 'Master'