

Greenkeeper education

Changes are about to take place in the format of greenkeeper training. BIGGA's executive director NEIL THOMAS tells David White how the changes came about and what's going on



Neil Thomas:
'Developments now taking place will prove of major significance in advancing the cause of greenkeeper education and training'

■ DW: There has been much talk throughout the past year of the establishment of an education unit for advancing greenkeeper education and training. I understand that agreement has now been reached to enable this unit to proceed. Will you confirm this and explain the background which led to its establishment?

■ NT: I can indeed confirm that agreement has been reached for the education unit, which will be the responsibility of the Greenkeepers Training Committee (GTC) to go ahead with immediate effect. I welcome this opportunity to explain the significant developments of recent months, which will have far reaching and beneficial consequences for greenkeeper education and training.

The starting point was a paper which I prepared for the May '92 meeting of the GTC under the heading 'The Future Funding of Greenkeeper Education'. In it I pointed out that the last few years had seen very significant progress in the development of greenkeeper education in

which the GTC, in conjunction with BIGGA and the Approved Training Colleges, had played a key role. However, a critical phase in funding had been reached and with the establishing of the Joint Golf Course Committee (JGCC) it was to be hoped that more substantial funding would become available in the near future. The immediate concern related to the Greenkeeper Training Manual - a major development - and I felt that the significance of this manual, its implementation and on-going reappraisal and development, was not to be underestimated.

Greenkeeping qualifications would in future receive due recognition within educational circles on a national basis, and I pointed out that we were on the verge of a major move forward in the committee's endeavours to enhance the education and training available to greenkeepers.

Time was short, as the introduction of the manual and establishment of the necessary administrative procedures needed to coincide with the start of the academic year in September 1992. It was my view that this could only be achieved by establishing an Educational Unit to oversee the future of greenkeeper education, which would be funded by the JGCC. Its initial task would be to oversee the implementation of the Training Manual with all its ramifications, and it would then move on to encompass further educational developments as recommended by the GTC and approved by the JGCC.

It was felt that the unit should be headed by BIGGA's education officer, who already → 22

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'BIGGA views the new situation in a positive light and welcomes the assurances that there will now at last be a substantial increase in the funding of greenkeeper training'

21 → held dual responsibilities in relation to BIGGA and the GTC. These dual responsibilities would continue as BIGGA itself would continue with greenkeeper education as its priority. BIGGA's current educational programmes in relation to conferences, seminars, management courses and the development of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate are on-going and would be developed within its own budget assisted by contributions from other bodies and companies as appropriate.

BIGGA was willing and able to offer the GTC facilities through which its programmes could be carried out, as a lease on additional accommodation at BIGGA's headquarters was being negotiated to take effect from 1 June 1992. However the board of management of BIGGA, whilst recognising the importance of the GTC's grants for the benefit of greenkeeper education over the last few years, felt it essential that the GTC now appreciated that the Association was unable, however willing, to accept any further workload in relation to greenkeeper education from the GTC without the provision of adequate resources, of which staffing represented a prime requirement.

There were two points to be made – the first was that the GTC could not continue to develop educational and training provisions for greenkeepers without a wider administrative base than that currently enjoyed under the auspices of BIGGA. Second, such a base could be developed cost effectively in conjunction with BIGGA's existing expertise and resources and without the GTC having to assume an 'employer' role.

■ DW: What was the GTC's response to this paper?

■ NT: The GTC was sympathetic to the proposals but felt unable to accept the financial commitment without a pledge to further funding.

■ DW: What subsequently transpired?

■ NT: Immediately following the GTC meeting in May I was contacted by the EGU's golf course committee and a meeting was set up involving myself and David Golding, along with the deputy secretary of the EGU and the chairman of the EGU's golf course committee. At the beginning of June the deputy secretary of the EGU submitted draft proposals to BIGGA for the establishment of a greenkeeper training education unit, and we responded accordingly. A final draft was forwarded to the chairman of the GTC at the beginning of July, indicating that the finance committee of the EGU had given outline approval for financial support for the setting up of the unit. Essentially the EGU was prepared to support BIGGA's initiative to the GTC in an attempt to finally get the education unit moving.

At this stage, therefore, both BIGGA and the EGU were in broad agreement on the proposals.

■ DW: Good, it seems as though rapid progress was being made. I wonder, were matters going too well?

■ NT: My understanding is that the papers were then submitted to a meeting of the JGCC by the

EGU's representative in July and at this meeting a decision was taken that the new unit must be administered separately from BIGGA and key amendments were made to the EGU's draft proposals. The next communication was a letter received at the end of August from the EGU enclosing the EGU's document for the setting up of the proposed unit and advising us that a meeting had been called for early September at the EGU offices. This was attended by the chairman and myself and it became clear to us that the document now contained significant amendments to the draft proposals from July. At the September meeting there was clarification of certain BIGGA reservations and general agreement on the need to proceed with the unit, whilst recognising that the proposals needed the formal consideration of both BIGGA and the GTC as well as the approval of the four home unions through the JGCC.

■ DW: I presume that you then reported to BIGGA's board of management and the GTC. What was the outcome?

■ NT: During October both BIGGA and the GTC responded formally to the proposals and whilst both bodies supported a proposed reduction in the size of the GTC, concerns were expressed in relation to the proposal that the administration of the GTC's accounts would pass from Aldwark Manor to the EGU's offices in Leicester, thereby separating general and financial administration, as well as in relation to BIGGA's representation on the restructured committee. Additionally, concerns were expressed about the future relationship of the GTC and the JGCC, which seemed far from clear. However, at the end of December the chairman and myself attended a meeting with the chairman of the GTC and the executive consultant to the JGCC where we were advised that the JGCC was determined to implement its proposals as they stood – irrespective of the representations from BIGGA and the GTC. Furthermore, in a new development, it was now envisaged that the staff employed within the new unit would be employed directly by the GTC and not by BIGGA. Irrespective of this, the GTC still wished to administer its affairs from within BIGGA's offices. Having originally requested a meeting with the JGCC as early as last July, the board's response was to again request a meeting with the JGCC to try and resolve the divergence of views on key points. The meeting never took place, though a subsequent meeting was held on 17 February with the chairman of the GTC and the chairman of the EGU's executive committee attending.

At this meeting BIGGA made it clear that the preferred solution was for the education unit to function within BIGGA's offices under the overall control of BIGGA's executive director, albeit with a clear separation of the functions of BIGGA and the GTC, given that there would be close co-operation on educational programmes. David Golding, as education officer, would head the education unit working through myself. Under this arrangement the staff of the unit would remain BIGGA employees, their costs being met by the GTC. In essence, the

work of the GTC would continue as it had done for the last five years under BIGGA's auspices.

However, it was again repeated that the JGCC wished to establish a separate employer role. This being the case, BIGGA's board of management determined that initially the GTC should seek separate accommodation with the two bodies continuing to work closely. To this end, BIGGA's enquiries indicated that accommodation could be made available in the near future within Aldwark Manor in the South Lodge building. BIGGA considered it crucial that the GTC remain at Aldwark Manor, as this was now viewed within the game of golf as the 'home' of greenkeeper training. By being located in near proximity the closest of co-operation would be possible.

■ DW: Did the meeting reach final agreement on the way forward?

■ NT: Yes indeed, it has finally been agreed that the GTC will function as an autonomous body – with its own employees – located within Aldwark Manor. I must make it clear that this is not what I see as the preferred solution. However, BIGGA views the new situation in a positive light and welcomes the assurances that there will now at last be a substantial increase in the funding of greenkeeper training.

BIGGA will continue with education as its foremost priority and its programmes for its members, for example the BTME, the National Education Conference, the Toro/PGA European Tour Student Greenkeeper award, the ICI Premier Greenkeeper award and our own management courses will continue to be administered from within BIGGA, liaising with the GTC as necessary.

It is anticipated that David Golding will accept an offer to head the new unit and whilst the two of us will continue to work closely on all greenkeeper training matters, sadly he will be leaving the employ of BIGGA. This applies also to Sue Gudgeon, who is likely to be going with David to carry out administrative duties with the GTC.

■ DW: What of the future?

■ NT: It is certainly a period of change. The four Home Unions – as the 'employers' – have at last accepted responsibility for funding the education and training of the 'employees'. In reaching this stage BIGGA has undoubtedly taken the initiative and after five years of striving, through the GTC, the Association can at last see a light at the end of the tunnel. I am optimistic for the future. I feel that the R&A will remain supportive and they have already agreed to match the four Home Union's contribution at a rate of 6.25p per registered golfer during 1993/94. The GTC will need time to settle down, whilst reorganisation within BIGGA will be necessary. In the medium term I am confident that the developments now taking place will prove of major significance in advancing the cause of greenkeeper education and training. BIGGA will continue to be at the forefront of these developments, ensuring that its members interests are best served.