

# Flying Divots

■ Noting that greenkeepers often have different views on what makes a golf course great, especially when making comparison with those who do no more than play the game, Greenkeeper International invites members to send in their own personal 'top ten', with reasons for their choice. Given sufficient participation, individual listings will be published on a monthly basis, with a final aggregate 'greenkeepers top thirty' listed at the end of 1993.

■ The previous system of fixing abstraction charges, where ten different regions of the National Rivers Authority all used different methods of charging, has been changed with effect from 1 April. Now such charges will be on a national basis, effectively levelling out charges so that some customers may end up paying more and some less. In the end it is declared that the new system will be fairer all round – and easy to understand! In effect, the new charges for 93/94 will see a rise over the 92/93 total of 1.7 per cent.

■ Today technical expertise in turf grass maintenance comes from all directions. Yet with the high cost of specialised machinery and materials there is an apparent vital need for a simple and workable system of combining planning, monitoring and recording. With the dynamic nature of turf grass, there is a need for a continued appraisal of response to wear, site limitations and treatments applied.

Consulting agronomist Gordon Jaaback, with the financial support and marketing expertise of Rolawn, has developed a simple visual system that will create interest, spark discussion and pinpoint the full picture in a sports turf maintenance programme. Full details of this free system were not available as we went to press, but will appear in next month's issue.

■ Greenkeepers' ideas are worth pounds! This magazine is eager to promote greater reader participation in its editorial output and is looking for YOUR good ideas. Any feature-length idea will be worth £15\*, each picture that is published: £5\*. In one or two hundred words tell us what you did, why you did it, how, when, where and the results – including money or time saved and simple guidelines for others to implement such techniques. We'll need to know if the idea conforms to good practice with regard to health and safety, the type of course (links, heathland, parkland), and the prevalent soil structure, natural or otherwise. Finally, if the idea is one that has been passed down over the years, we'd like to know who to credit.

You don't need to be a journalist, we'll see to it that your good ideas are turned into good copy.

Write to the editor, 13 Firl Close, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2HL. Decisions to publish will be based on originality, appeal and merit.

\* Paid on publication.

Due to BT's continuing digitisation programme, BIGGA HQ's telephone numbers have changed.

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**Farewell to the boom and hello to doom and gloom? Not so, says ecologist DAVID STUBBS, who argues that despite recession and clampdowns, obstacles can be overcome and there are grounds for genuine optimism**

**T**he twin perils of economic recession and tighter environmental controls have given the golf development industry much cause for thought. Gone are the heady, optimistic days of the recent boom period but nor is it all doom and gloom. While a few spectacular failures make the headlines, a good number of new courses have come on stream and will doubtless become successful ventures. Evidence of plenty of unmet demand yet to be tapped, coupled with the increasing difficulties faced by rural landowners and continued emphasis on land use diversification, suggests there is life in golf course development for a good few years to come.

What has to change is the methodology. Traditionally the emphasis has been on design and this has led the way on most projects. However this has some fundamental flaws which are being exposed in the new circumstances of the late 20th Century. Crudely put, golf development needs more science and less art. Boring perhaps but the bottom line is that golf projects must pay and this leaves little room for sentiment.

Good design will always be a vital aspect of golf but it is just one component of an increasingly complex process. Environmental and technical deficiencies may ultimately pose more serious and costly problems.

On the environmental side, the combination of public pressure and conservation lobbying has influenced the planning climate to such an extent that projects have to be presented in a much more studied and detailed manner if they are to be at all acceptable. This is no bad thing, it promotes a more responsible and site responsive approach to development which has been lacking in the past. But the golf world has been slow to appreciate the value of using the environment as an indispensable ally rather than a constraint to conquer.

One important effect has been a strong curb on the grandiose projects with associated real estate development. Such schemes are now rarely acceptable on attractive green field sites and market conditions have further put on a brake. This means that golf itself has to pay its way, unsubsidised by houses and hotel profits. Environmentally acceptable golf course sites tend to be concentrated on low grade urban fringe farmland and these are the target sites for pay and play developments. Here the premium is on low development costs and efficient management, not on big name designers and championship style marketing hype.

These dual environmental and economic pressures acting on golf course development in turn impose a rethink on

## ① Tougher planning constraints



## ② Technically difficult sites



## ③ Tighter financial margins



technical matters. Low grade urban fringe farmland is not the most suitable land from a pure golfing point of view but it is what we have to work with. Modern technology may have the potential for converting virtually any site to golfing land but this comes at a price.

Capping off a landfill with a golf course is one viable route, since the landfill profits easily cover the golf course construction costs (the site would have to be made good anyway) and golf provides a profitable end use with virtually instant returns. What's more, the design is likely to be less constrained, while site restoration offers long-term environmental benefits. The snag is of course that there is a limited number of such sites suitable and available for golf, while getting a landfill licence on a new site is even harder than getting permission for golf.

In general therefore, the modern golf course developer has to contend with the triple difficulties of tougher planning constraints, technically difficult sites and tighter financial margins. In theory this ought to elevate the importance of course managers and greenkeepers in the development process since it would be insane to press ahead with a project which has serious flaws which would lead to major, costly repairs and/or management difficulties.

However, it has not been fashionable to worry about soils, drainage, irrigation,

# 3 HURDLES TO GOLF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

agronomy and maintenance systems at the early stages of a development. Yet these are the nuts and bolts of a course which must be correct if it is to succeed on a long-term basis. Rebuilding of greens and tees after three or four years, or upgrading drainage or irrigation systems is not normally included in the business plan forecasts of a project. Often patch and mend is the only available option and for several years one has to make do with less than the best. This is unnecessarily expensive and potentially fatal in a competitive market.

Similar problems confront environmental specialists in convincing developers to plan along the length of a project and not just hop from one crisis point to another. Most calls on ecologists and the like are still largely firefighting exercises, to sort out immediate concerns related to planning difficulties. Only rarely does anyone consider that an environmental strategy could be a sound basis for taking a project forward, which co-ordinated with technical and financial appraisal, would help set the parameters for design and construction. The advantages would be numerous; a development with an intellectual logic based on the quality of the site and matched to appropriate economic criteria, with a clear understanding of the end product, including its operational management.

This would give golf projects a more credible image which in turn would enhance their acceptability in environmental and planning terms. Delays in dealing with objectors and resubmitting details could be reduced, planning conditions would be less onerous since

appropriate conservation measures would have been built into the scheme rather than imposed from outside and expenditure on construction and establishment could be more effectively targeted and controlled. Investors these days will be more impressed with schemes demonstrating sound technical appreciation coupled with environmental awareness. The logic of this is to make development a shorter and smoother process, bringing forward the revenue side when the course opens, with every prospect that it is going to last for many years.

To get to this happy state the direct way necessitates getting the right advice at day one. A three part appraisal is essential – your golf technical adviser will assess whether the site is right for golf (sufficient space, appropriate soils and terrain, water requirements, potential construction and management snags); the environmental expert will advise on whether golf is right for the site (ecological, landscape and historical constraints); and the financial consultant will say whether it will pay. The three are interlinked and one cannot effectively conclude an individual section without reference to the others. Together they provide the foundation for taking the project forward through planning and design, or an early and relatively inexpensive exit.

This appraisal-led methodology is steadily gaining credence in the industry. However, few have really grasped the crucial interdependence between financial performance and environmental and course management aspects.

More and more planning and environment related guide-lines, directives and regulations are coming forward and these will increasingly impinge on existing as well as new golf courses. Pollution control legislation, the introduction of environmental management systems (BS7750), eco-audit schemes and

environmental assessment regulations are all going to have a strong effect on golf over the years to come. They need to be understood by all concerned and this goes throughout the golfing industry. A number of important initiatives are taking place. The European Golf Association in collaboration with the R&A has been taking a pro-active approach in preparing "Environmental Guide-lines for Golf Development in Europe". It is hoped that this project will set the framework for treating environmental issues in golf development throughout the EC, with the blessing of the EC Commission and leading environmental organisations – better to get your own house in order before others do it for you.

In the USA the United States Golf Association has spent some \$5m over the last three years on environmental research and campaigns, and other major golfing bodies over there are actively pushing their own claims for environmental probity. Over here such activity is not so apparent and while it is unlikely ever to match the scale of American investment, the golf industry will soon have to pull together to address environmental issues in a co-ordinated manner. Identifying the lead body make take some time but it will have to happen.

For the greenkeeping community here is an excellent opportunity to play a key and influential role in the debate. It is greenkeepers who ultimately have closest involvement with environmental management, so it is only right they should be principals in any related initiative. BIGGA has for some time included conservation within its education programme. But this is only a start. As a profession greenkeepers will need to be much more aware and knowledgeable of environmental trends and issues to be able to make effective representations on policy matters and to ensure that guide-lines and regulations are meaningful and realistic. Ultimately it is all about raising standards across a broad range of issues.

■ The author, David Stubbs BSc., MIEEM, is the managing director of Environmental Golf Services.