

FUTURE OF THE FESCUE

The desirability of *Festuca rubra* ssp. *commutata* as a major component of the finest turf has long been held as dogma in the teaching of greenkeeping and, by and large, still is today. Seldom is a top quality seed mix offered without it, and the most expensive cultivated turf usually contains one or two of the top varieties.

And yet, nearly everywhere in the country, difficulty has been experienced in retaining the fescue content of greens and on many inland courses it is absent altogether, the sward constituents being bent and annual meadow grass in varying proportions.

For sure, some management regimes employed have not helped the situation, though in a hopefully enlightened age sound practices – plenty of aeration and careful control of water and fertiliser application – seem to be altering sward balances very slowly, if at all, in favour of the finer grasses. As a result, many greenkeepers have had to become experts in pandering to the whims of *Poa annua*, and are notwithstanding capable of producing excellent surfaces, albeit limited to certain times of the year.

So, is the production of the traditional fescue/bent sward still desirable? More to the point, when greenkeepers seem to be swimming against the flow in trying to discourage meadow grass, is it worth the effort?

Some years ago, Nick Park wrote an article outlining what had been done at Lindrick Golf Club to herald the return of fescue/bent greens. He went on to give in some detail an appraisal of the resilience factor of the latter, which concluded that fescue/bent greens were more receptive and gave the best and most consistent rewards to the well-struck shot. The resilience was ascribed to the fact that fescue/bent greens will remain firm, whereas *Poa annua* dominated greens are usually either soft to the point of plugging or too hard to hold a ball. Perhaps these observed tendencies have more to do with thatch, poor drainage and overwatering than the sward constituents, but certainly when the engine room of a densely *Poa annua* sward gets going in the height of summer, evaporating water at a suicidal rate, it then is very easy to err on one side or the other with the irrigation programme.

This difficulty apart, another argument for the traditional green is that attempts to produce a top quality surface with *Poa annua* is in terms of both time and money an expensive hobby, trying alternatively through the year to thin it when it's thick, boost it when it's thin and to fight off the inevitable ravages of fungal attack. Add this to difficulties of presentation – profuse seed head production and the patchwork quilt effect noticeable as

fertiliser is expended – and a case must then be evolving for a more consistent performer.

It is worth mentioning at this point that as an alternative the creeping bent monosand has been introduced in the UK. The pros and cons of this alternative are already a long-running bone of contention, and this article is concerned with the virtues, or not, of the fescue.

The most important desirable qualities of the fescue have been held as the ability to withstand and recover from drought, and tolerance of heavy wear. Of lesser importance these days is the classification of fescues as 'poverty grasses' – able to withstand low levels of nutrition in inhospitable acid environments.

It is in the 'heavy wear' area that thinking on the performance of the fescue may have to be revised, and it would be relevant at this point to look at new courses/constructions. Eighteen properly prepared sites with suitable free-draining rootzones, irrigation system etc., are either sown or turfed with a fescue/bent mix. The usual moratorium is imposed while the turf establishes. What happens next varies according to the expectations of the management, but you are still dealing with a two-headed coin – either way it's tails you lose for the fescue.



by TONY HOWORTH

If the management decides to open six months later like some amphetamine-soused drag racer, going from 0-30,000 rounds in six months, then at the end of the first season fescue content will be rapidly in decline and some of the bent may have gone with it, leaving areas of zilch. If, on the other hand, traffic on the course is increased gradually from a low initial number of rounds per annum, then the fescues may take four or five years to pack their bags before waving the meadow grass in.

The above may be seen as a very gloomy scenario, and one which decries the efforts of some excellent course managers on new sites who do not have *Poa annua* (yet?). For the rest of the poor devils who have inherited established greens demonstrating 50 years of excellence in the growing of *Poa annua*, what hope? Perhaps it is time for some contentions on how we may help ourselves with both new and existing sites:

i. Existing greens are unlikely to be surrounded by an abundance of flowering fescues so seed importation would be required. Overseeding should be helped by being carried out when there is maximum time to establish, under conditions of reduced traffic and least opposition from vigorous *Poa annua*. This suggests seeding in the autumn, in the hope also that a slightly longer winter sward will offer some protection to emergent seedlings.

ii. On new sites the maturity of the fescue plant is important. If it has grown to a decent size before being 'trained', it will have a better chance of withstanding wear. So with new constructions, perhaps turf is a better option from the outset, unless a longer maturing time is allowed.

iii. It has been suggested that fertiliser applications should be of the very slow release type. Forced growth is anathema to fescues and the plant will not take up nitrogen into the leaf as would, say, ryegrass. Applications of quick release fertiliser therefore favour anything but the fescue.

iv. Steps should be taken to ensure that no single area of the green is punished beyond its limitations. Fescues will not return of their own accord once gone. This may be helped by frequent hole-changing and, failing all else, limiting play.

v. Consideration should be given to the timing of any hollow-tine operations. If there is a clear spot *Poa annua* is always ready to fill it, though more readily at certain times of the year. So make the odds favour the fescue.

vi. If greens are new constructions, wear tolerance will be helped by making them as large as possible.

You may say at this point – 'but of course we've already tried this – and it doesn't work!'

But have we tried hard enough? A concluding contention might then be: If you take a four hundred square metre fescue/bent green from the seaside links, rootzone and all, deposit it next to a suitable drain in some inland park and proceed to manage it in customary inland fashion, in five years you will have a *Poa* dominated problem. If, however, you take an eight hundred square metre etc., etc., and manage it under the constraints applied above, in five years you would have...?

■ The author, Tony Howorth, is course manager at Willesley Park Golf Club, Ashby-de-la-Zouch. He is also secretary of the East Midland section of BIGGA.

Are you a fescue fan? Replies please to 'Bones of Contention' The Editor, Greenkeeper International, 13 Firls Close, Seaford, East Sussex. BN25 2HL. Subject to response, an up-date will appear in a future issue.