

## BONES OF CONTENTION

# As long as it looks good...

There are many styles of management utilised in the interests of producing a first class golf course in top notch playing condition. Unfortunately, the pressures placed on many greenkeepers – to produce playing conditions under difficult circumstances – result in the art of greenkeeping, i.e. the production of fescue and agrostis playing surfaces, often being given low priority and with a greater emphasis placed on the intensive management of *Poa annua* in an effort to mimic conditions naturally produced in fine turf.

As these meadowgrass conditions are becoming the norm, and are widely accepted by club golfers and pro's alike, the question now being asked is not 'how do you produce quality turf grasses?', but rather 'what do they look like?'. How therefore can we expect golfers to appreciate the benefits of quality turf when opinions on what actually constitutes quality turf vary according to the surfaces played upon. This leaves agrostis and fescue greens at a disadvantage as they are not produced often enough, and those who have the privilege of playing on them regularly take them for granted.

Although there is now a greater demand for information regarding traditional maintenance practices, that demand, I believe, comes from a minority of greenkeepers with traditional quality in mind. By the same standard, as fewer people now are familiar with these practices, our growing profession is becoming a dying art.

I'm sure the tongues are already wagging to the song, 'That's OK for links courses, but you can't grow bent and fescue here.' Of course there may be conditions which make the corrective process difficult to achieve satisfactorily over every green, but it should also be noted that though it takes time to produce fescue areas, agrostis is a very competitive grass when given a chance – and we can't all claim to be the exception.

For the programme to be considered successful, 100% bent and fescue is not necessarily demanded, although a high percentage should certainly be the aim. Part of the problem is that greenkeepers undertaking a corrective policy don't know what to expect, and when *Poa annua* begins to look sickly, the tendency is to change the programme by way of a fertiliser application.

However, after the first season, signs of agrostis begin to show in the form of small veins through areas of the turf.

Those on links courses may be more fortunate, with small areas of fescue (which may have been overpowered in the past) now showing in patches, indeed becoming more competitive as their environmental conditions change. But there are other changes which the greenkeeper does not see, and these are the ones which can cause the biggest problem. As an example, within an improvement programme the greenkeeper may be determined to discover what happens under extreme conditions, and in so doing he may be seen as greenkeeping for personal satisfaction and not acting in the best interests of his club. This may take the form of drying turf excessively when this is not required, or some other exaggeration of what he deems 'necessary' in the requirements of a corrective programme.

Although this is not part of an improvement programme, it is often labelled as such, suggesting therefore the poor conditions which a corrective programme creates – NOT TRUE. This proves often to be a golfer's impression, and can be a valuable learning experience for those who continue. For others, however, a loss of interest, coupled with pressure from club officials, can result in an about-turn of policy and a return to intensively managed *Poa annua*. However, the programme does work, albeit demanding a degree of patience, commonsense and the determination to succeed.

In carrying out a corrective programme, tremendous pressures may be placed on the head greenkeeper, thus making it even more vital that he communicates adequately at committee level, and informs the membership generally of all progress and of the benefits to be gained from year-round improved conditions.

The greenkeeper, I believe, must present himself in such a professional manner, otherwise those from a different sector of the golf industry may well be given administrative positions to cover perceived shortfalls within his domain, and the greenkeeper will again be pushed to the background. Further, as his work encourages the growth of visitors and increases income for club, professional and steward alike, the

greenkeeper may find nothing more than an increased workload, created by the effects of added traffic, and receive no professional recognition.

We now have a very strange situation in British greenkeeping which I am sure we all find of interest in varying degrees, depending on whether we support the use of creeping bents or are just plain inquisitive of the conditions under which they will survive and the surfaces they will produce. That situation is further confused in that we are requested now to consider the management of grasses for turf that are not naturally dominant in our climate, when we haven't even mastered the production of grasses which are!

I was interested also to read some months ago about the speed of greens being a reason for cutting greens at 3/16 of an inch, however it should be noted that carrying out maintenance methods

for indigenous turf generally produces greens with exceptionally fast surfaces, and heights may require to be raised in order to maintain putting speeds that are acceptable to the majority of club golfers. This being the case, one of the major limiting factors of fine turf – ultra close mowing – can be eliminated.

In a nearby golf shop the following verse is displayed:

*Those who work with their hands  
are tradesmen,*

*Those who work with their hands  
and their heads are craftsmen,*

*But those who work with their  
hands, their heads and their hearts  
are artists.*

I think this describes greenkeepers very well.

■ This contribution to 'Bones of Contention' is from William McKechnie, assistant links superintendent at Carnoustie Golf Links, Angus, Scotland.



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