

Why practical knowledge beats the theories

A month in hospital has enabled me to catch up on the last year's articles. Compaction seems to be dealt with monthly! Cure, aspirin for a headache, no cost effective workable answers. No one addresses the fundamental causes, or produces remedies, that are cost effective.

What has eventually really made me write to you is your March issue (Tom O'Brien at Royal Birkdale) How he and so many very good men like him can manage to carry on with nothing else but contradictory theoretical advice is quite amazing.

The following practical thoughts you may find interesting, the condition of many playing surfaces, and new golf courses in particular, are of very poor quality. However I do believe that Performance Standards have a vital role to play in specifying the construction of an installation.

My views are based on many years of practical experience creating playing surfaces. Unfortunately too many projects are specified by agronomists with an abundance of theory but little understanding of the practical aspects of what is required. Agronomy and its never-ending tentacles are the main factors that are responsible for standards, inadequate specifications and, seemingly, a total misunderstanding of what grass really needs to grow and perform to high standards, when subject to severe use and extremes of weather.

Those who doubt this should look closely at the golf courses constructed over the last few years, and the condition of 92 clubs in the Football League. Almost without exception, there is water in excess, mud in abundance, compaction and overall yearly deterioration. This is a worldwide problem. Mud is everywhere, whether we look at Australian Rules, Rugby, American Football or other sports, we have mud.

As I have said on many occasions before, today's agronomists are yesteryear's brilliant pupils, but many are so full of theory that they are still at the top of their theoretical trees. The trouble is that the practicalities of what the industry fundamentally needs have not yet been written. So how can they learn, and the trees keep falling down.

The owner/customer. The patient who needs good practical,

cost-effective help and advice.

The architect. The qualified golf course architect. Most architects presume that they know; they presume that their brief is to create. Wrong, very wrong. Theirs is not to alter our beautiful countryside. We have more than enough championship golf course blots on the landscape, half finished poor ideas – most like battlefields. We need membership courses and pay as you play courses, to be enjoyed by the majority with greens, tees and fairways that blend into the landscape. More trees should be planted for the next generation and golf courses should be virtually hidden, evolved from the landscape, not made.

Contractors. The reputable contractors know what to do, but they are supplied with a hotchpotch of information; a specification, part architect, part suppliers, part agronomist, all thinking that compatibility is something between them and their neighbours' wives. No thought is given to soils, sands etc which may or may not grow good grass. Most contractors know that with earth moving it's not what you do, but how you do it, and when. I have seen no specification mention that the operation depending on the soil moisture content etc.

Woe betide the contractor who says we must stop now because of poor ground conditions. No! Time is of the essence; it's too costly to stop. Earth moving – oh what a bore! Strip, stockpile, store and hope to God that when it comes

out it will be better than when it went in. No chance! Deprived of air, organic matter ignored, compacted beyond all recognition, it is often rolled into submission.

Soil for stockpiles should be prepared, (whoever heard of such an exercise?), have additives included and be resuscitated when it is replaced. There are ways to do this cost-effectively. Soil treated this way will make good fairways etc.

Now we come to the subject of worldwide debate.

Greens. Our friends the agronomists now come into full bloom, waxing lyrical but again nearly all completely ignoring compatibility. Their pet theories abound; like a party political broadcast, fact is submerged by theory. Percentages of sand/soil mixes vary like the daily rainfall forecasts. There is no thought that little grows easily in sand or that sand is inherently unstable. That sand is the main ingredient for concrete is never allowed to linger. After so many years we really need to ask some fundamental questions about what we are trying to achieve.

We wish to grow grass to be abused, to tolerate strange conditions, and to function effectively. Where and how do we start?

Many take the easy road, proprietary topdress mixes or the like, which are basically a concoction of sands, silts and clays, or in the case of the pack leaders a mix of unstable sands, and pray.

We need three basic ingredients

in our structures:

- 1 Air (rarely mentioned, often totally ignored);
- 2 Moisture.
- 3 Nutrition and natural organic matter.

All three must be compatible, easy to maintain and improve annually. The structure must by definition be permeable and stabilised for heavy traffic.

It is now possible to produce high quality, free draining, mud-free, non-compactable, stabilised rootzones for each and every sport wishing to use natural grass intensively. I know, I have done this and am doing it cost-effectively. After two decades it still works.

Finally, our overworked and under-informed greenkeepers and groundsmen. Let education concentrate on the structures they have to work with. Everything else is of little import if the structures are inadequate.

It is now possible to restructure surface soils cost-effectively. Surface soil, for those still in doubt, is the area below the grass that varies from 150 mm (6in) to 300 mm (12in) in depth. That wonderful area produced by poor specifications; the area for thatch, black layer and various degrees of compaction.

Our ultimate aim is to ensure that this layer performs to its best ability and the starting point to achieve this aim is to set out the performance standards that we want to attain, not in isolation, but as a basis from which we can draw up our construction specifications.

**Dixie Thompson,
Chester Moor, Co Durham**

South Turf was excellent, but...

What a show! I refer of course to South Turf. Can I congratulate the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association's South East section on an excellent exhibition.

Gem Professional had a wonderful show and met many new customers. David Wood and the team were exceptionally helpful and the weather they provided was second to none. I hope this is to become an annual event and ensure you of our support in the future. Sadly I have two complaints, neither aimed at BIGGA, that I feel are worthy of mention.

Firstly, I would question the quality of Southern pork pies (negotiations are under way to obtain licence to provide Lancashire pies next year) and, secondly, I must protest at Ron Jobson's inhospitable approach when asked for the loan of his hat during the heat of the afternoon! (Who said this was a friendly industry?)

In conclusion my thanks again to the BIGGA and in particular David Wood and his team for an excellent, well run exhibition.

**AW Hardie, sales manager,
Gem Professional,
Oswaldtwistle**

Message for all

A word of warning to fellow greenkeepers: if ever you are tempted to leave off any safety equipment – it may be uncomfortable on a hot day, for example – my advice is *don't!*

My safety boots saved me from losing my foot in an accident. Don't think the unexpected won't happen to you.

My thanks to Richard Whyman and all at Devon and Cornwall section for the basket of fruit sent to my hospital bed, the phone call from BIGGA HQ and the good wishes from everyone.

**Peter Stringer,
Isle of Scilly Golf Club**