

Speed kills

Heydon Grange Golf and Country Club opened its first 18 holes last May and another nine are due to open this spring. Formerly farmland, the transformation has come about in 15 months on what course manager Anthony Black calls "a distinctively low budget" - a sharp contrast to his previous project, the golf course at Euro-Disney. But no matter what type of course you're on, players want championship-style quick, slick greens. Here, Anthony calls for a lowering of speed limits - and not just on greens...

As winter draws in and growth slows down, so do green speeds.

The need for speed has decimated many a fine sward, and will continue to do so whilst there is a pressure to create and recreate "professional tournament conditions" for amateur club events.

It was with this potential dilemma in mind that I tentatively sought reassurance from my proprietor/chief executive prior to my appointment managing construction completion and grow-in at Heydon Grange in Hertfordshire that I would enjoy complete autonomy regarding agronomy.

So, within the parameters of strict development costs and frugal operating budget, we set about bringing a 'links style' layout to fruition on the borders of Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex, our 200 acres bordering all three counties.

We opened our first 18 holes on May 14 1994 following an accelerated grow-in; accelerated by the need to be open for business a.s.a.p. With the last seed hitting the ground in August '93, we faced the challenge of being show ready by April '94. By this time the cry

had already rung out - What are the greens like? How fast are they?

We all know that speed kills. A construction project, a grow-in, a 3-litre Turbo XXX3Ri can all be driven too fast; and most of us are aware of the danger.

I'd previously worked in France for two years on Golf Euro-Disney, a project driven at breakneck speed with a 12-month grow-in on Pennecross greens cut to 4.5mm. But business is business and if I could grow-in creeping bent within 12 months then why not any other grass was a recurring question. This other grass was 80% fescue, 20% browntop bent, approximately, give or take 20% *Poa annua* here and there.

A turf supplier had been 'selected' who would guarantee *Poa*-free turf, which was presumably why there was no extra charge for the meadow grass content therein.... However, as time was against us and the need to achieve deadlines fast approaching - speed being of essence etc - we set about the 'Poa issue' with much vigour, no little frenzy and several pluggers, daisy grabbers, cutlery forks and sharp knives!

By the time we opened this 'fescue rescue' was deemed 95% successful - we're still working on the other 5% - and our first guests and members were, and have continued to be, extremely happy with our efforts and results.

But, you know, opening with fescue is one thing, keeping it is quite another - especially inland.

Which brings me back to speed. Our opening mowing schedule on greens was 4-5 cuts per week at 7mm with no complaints - players being of a forgiving nature in the immediate post-opening honeymoon period. We came down to 6mm in June, 5-7 cuts per week, with our best stimpmeter reading being 9, achieved on days of double cutting for specific events.

By November we had returned to a more leisurely 7mm cutting regime. Next spring we will follow the same procedure, ultimately reaching an all-time low of 5mm. Sward density, vigour and strong root development will be the key factors in determining when and if we lower the blades.

We aim to maintain this regime for the future by ensuring the practice is written into our operating procedures and course maintenance philosophy.

However, I am not naive enough to believe that we will never be faced with the demand for tournament green speeds. As our popularity and roundage grows, prestige events will undoubtedly be held and we shall be delighted to host them - on our terms and at our pace. But because we know speed kills we are in no rush!

The height of success? About 6mm I reckon.

Life can be tough as a greenkeeper in Germany

Thinking of working abroad? We asked British greenkeeper Elaine Holland, a trained hairdresser who now cuts greens and fairways with partner Stuart Bishop, what it's really like greenkeeping in Germany...

Ahead greenkeeper can expect to be paid between £2,100 and £3,000 per month, but total deductions come to about 37%. Accommodation is usually paid. This is usually a flat above the sheds or a flat above the clubhouse. You can be asked to contribute towards the electricity, which is expensive - about £300 per month. Overtime is stored from summer and paid back to you in wages throughout the winter. You can ask for the overtime money monthly, but you will probably be unemployed come winter.

Winters here are freezing - 20 below and frost over a foot deep. Half the members and green fee-paying players will still play and the other half will iceskate on the small lakes and even greens, with the owner's blessing (not the greenkeeper's!).

Etiquette doesn't seem to have reached Germany yet, and dog-walking on the course is very popular. In fact, the dogs usually pull the trolleys, and every golf course has a children's playground.

Expect the members to turn the irrigation system on and off at will (by the control valves), and stroll in and out of the shed, move tees and even cut new holes.

We have found, too, there is always another greenkeeper from a nearby club - probably a local farmer who has picked up a little greenkeeping here and there - who will contradict everything you do. One of their most popular phrases will be the German equivalent of, "We don't do it like that here." It is a constant battle.

There are lots of rules and regulations in Germany with the environment people controlling what you plant, where, when, how, and they are very strict, especially with chemicals. Legal and illegal chemical rules change weekly, so it is advisable to keep in contact with them regularly.

To be a German greenkeeper with relevant qualifications, you must have attended six weeks over a three-year period at a greenkeeping college, you do not have to be employed by a golf club, this gets you your certificate (prüfung). By the way, German staff finish work Friday lunchtime until Monday. Other problems include wild boar, deer, foxes and an unlimited supply of moles, which are a protected species, so you can only ask them to leave.

What are your views on...

- ◆ Greens committees
- ◆ The role of the chairman of green
- ◆ Golf course furniture and fittings
- ◆ Disputes with bosses
- ◆ Getting a water extraction licence
- ◆ How to make courses more environmentally friendly
- ◆ Relieving compaction
- ◆ Using ATVs

If you have anything interesting to say about any of these subjects (or any other subject related to greenkeeping), send a letter to the Editor, Greenkeeper International, Aldwark Manor, Aldwark, Alne, York YO6 2NF. It will help us greatly as we prepare forthcoming features.