

Seeking a middle path

For many greenkeepers this has not been a good year. Reports to Headquarters indicate that greenkeepers continue to be hauled before their green committees with the prime accusation being 'the state of the golf course'. There seems to be little regard for the cold days of May and June when the grass was not growing to be followed by a heat-wave which in many cases burnt off what little grass had appeared. That is not to excuse the incompetent, idle greenkeeper but there is increasing concern within the Association at the treatment handed out by green committees often to men of vast experience where wisdom in greenkeeping matters would be difficult to deny. Frequently it seems that those who sit on green committees, professionals from many walks of life, act in an arbitrary and dictatorial manner which is quite alien to how they conduct their own businesses. At the receiving end is the greenkeeper and the result is stress and disillusion.

Greenkeepers are only too well aware, or should be, of the technical and practical expertise needed today to meet the highest standards of course maintenance. They labour under conditions unbeknown to their predecessors of twenty



BIGGA in focus

BY NEIL THOMAS

to thirty years ago with the vast increase of traffic on golf courses and the demand for winter golf. The educational courses and programmes developed through BIGGA and the GTC in recent years have now set in place an educational structure which can accommodate greenkeepers at all levels. Even the mature greenkeeper, without pretensions to attend college, is catered for through the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) Scheme as a means of recognising the experience of the years. In this day and age greenkeepers can only stand still at their peril. I believe that the great majority of greenkeepers well understand the need to move forward and do seek the support of their clubs to this end. This support is not

always forthcoming and sometimes reluctantly given. Many clubs still need to recognise that the golf course is without doubt their greatest asset and that their most valuable employees are, in fact, their greenkeepers. The educational processes include courses in communication and in this key area there is hope for the future. For surely it is the breakdown in communication which is often the root cause of the greenkeeper's problems with his green committee. Sometimes this breakdown is pre-empted by a failure of the greenkeeper to communicate with the golf club membership. Slowly but surely the quality of the training now provided is reflected in the growing confidence of the greenkeeper to communicate with the membership, initially in one-to-one situations and through judicious use of the club's noticeboard. Equally there is increasing evidence of the enlightened golf club allowing its Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper to address meetings of the general membership regarding the maintenance of the golf course and his role within the club.

Some Course Managers/Head Greenkeepers stand accused of lack of management expertise, and this after many years service. One is moved to ask exactly what has been going on during those years. If the employee concerned has stood still why has the club allowed that to happen? If the employee has sought to enhance his expertise has the club offered assistance towards his training and if not, why not? More often than not in these situations there are two sides to the argument and there needs to be a meeting of minds and compromise. I am not seeking to defend those who fail to meet acceptable standards. It is my belief, however, that even in this day and age most greenkeepers, by the very nature of their calling, remain industrious and concerned, as a matter of professional pride, to present their

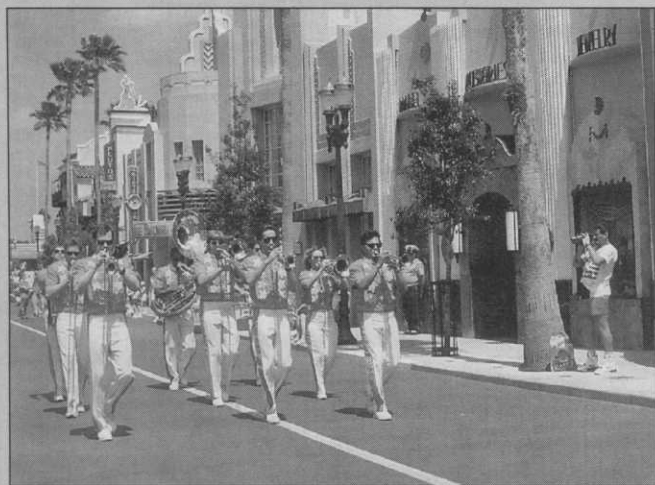
golf courses to the best possible standard. They can be frustrated by lack of resources and equally by the reluctance of clubs to budget for and support their training needs. Some clubs even object to their employees joining BIGGA as their professional association. Such restrictions are unnecessary and indeed clearly not in a golf club's interests. The enhancement of knowledge must ultimately lead to higher standards of greenkeeping, better-maintained golf courses and the plaudits of the members. I'm sure that green committees do not enjoy having members complaining any more than greenkeepers enjoy incurring the wrath of green committees. There has to be a better way of running the show.

My plea therefore is for better communication, cooperation and understanding. Unemployed greenkeepers represent the worst possible scenario – most certainly for the individuals and equally certainly for the golf clubs who have to find successors who may or may not be more competent than the individuals being replaced. Whatever the rights and wrongs of dismissals in the current year, it reflects no credit on the game of golf and there has to be a better way forward. It lies in education and training, in conciliation rather than confrontation and in an ability for those vested with green committee responsibilities to take the broad rather than narrow view in understanding the pressures under which the modern greenkeeper has to operate as well as respecting his ever-increasing skills and knowledge.

The **BEST** piece of
ADVICE I ever received



George Brown,
Course Manager at
Turnberry:
"Learn to eat
humble pie. You
often have to do
something that you don't
really want to do."



Travel with BIGGA to the GCSAA
Conference and Show in Orlando,
February 1996 See Page 9