

# Is there a spring in your heels?

It is a Monday morning early in April, the morning after the night before. Yes it's *that* Monday morning, when, like millions of others, you have spent the previous evening viewing the final exciting stages of the Masters from the Augusta National. The Golf Course was at its majestic best, the weather was glorious, the flowers in full bloom and the golf quite breathtaking on fast, true greens. If you suddenly have the feel-good factor then you can be assured that your golf club members have that very same feeling as they make their way to the golf club just hours after witnessing the idyllic setting of Augusta. So everything in the garden, or should I say golf course, is lovely, or is it? When you wake up on that Monday morning at the crack of dawn, the first you hear is a howling gale and the rain thudding against the window. It's the first signs of a bad day at the office. It's been a cold spring and the grass isn't growing, your maintenance budget has been cut and you've had to shed a member of staff. At the first tee a delay is already apparent as members grapple with the adverse conditions. Their enthusiasm, galvanised by the events of the previous evening, is rapidly being tempered in the wind and the rain. Out on the course the greens are already gathering water and then you spot the Captain and Chairman of Green in the second four-ball already held up. There is no longer any feel-good factor but an overwhelming feeling of stress. Spring may have sprung but this is a very different world to the one you witnessed only a few hours ago and where have the good times gone?

Why is it then that the coming of spring and the Masters Tournament is invariably accompanied by tension among the greenkeeping fraternity? For many greenkeepers it assumes the stressful proportions of the "Augusta Syndrome". In many ways, of course, this is purely illusory, and Augusta merely focuses attention on a particular time in the year when members enthusiasm and expectations are high for the new season, while greenkeepers under



## BIGGA in focus

BY NEIL THOMAS

pressure from budget and staffing restrictions are invariably coming out of a winter period which has been wet, cold and unyielding in terms of preparing the golf course to members' expectations.

On the one hand then, members expectations for their golf course, while on the other the trials and tribulations of the greenkeeping staff. It's not long before the Chairman of Green is under pressure on the one hand from members seeking instant solutions to transform their windswept, sodden, under-prepared golf course while on the other, the greenkeepers are seeking his understanding and support as they work within the limitations of weather and often inadequate budgets and staffing. In turn the Captain comes under pressure. An improvement in the weather can help but the climate cannot be guaranteed. If matters continue to deteriorate, it may well be only a matter of months before the die is cast and another Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper bites the dust. This all has an air of inevitability about it and yet is it really inevitable? Surely in this day and age these are issues which an enlightened golf club can tackle constructively and resolve. Alternatively are they in fact issues of this day and age with its pressures and demands which did not exist in anything like this measure in days gone by and where there is no will to resolve?

I come down on the side of the former and many of the problems can be alleviated through communication. This is needed throughout the club and it does

not begin on that notorious Monday morning in April. It is a 12 month process. Let's take the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper first. How often does he speak with members in a social context – on the golf course, in the clubhouse or perhaps even the car park? Does he utilise the members' notice board to pass on information on course conditions, alterations and improvements? What provision is there for the holding of workshops for members where they can be informed of the capital and maintenance budgets, of the work programme and of any proposals for improvements to the golf course? Is there regular contact with the Chairman of Green and close liaison with the club secretary? Is there a good working relationship with the club professional for he is in regular contact with members? There are avenues then which can and must be utilised by the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper to get his message across. If he and his staff are then seen to be working to the club's approved programme to the best of their ability within their budget and staffing resources and given that members have been provided with the facts, then much criticism will begin to dissipate.

Then there is the role of Chairman of Green and his Committee. It is their duty to communicate with the greenkeeping staff and subsequently through the club's committee structure to the general membership. They can also communicate with members in a social context while playing golf. The partnership of the Chairman

of Green and Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper is a vital one and must be worked at by both parties. Quite often it is the breakdown in this relationship which precipitates trouble. This breakdown can often be the result of member pressure which in turn undermines the Chairman of Green's position. He needs to be someone who shows an empathy with greenkeeping and greenkeepers and, who, without instant knowledge, is prepared to learn in his role. There needs to be a long term commitment by him and his club to that role for continuity is all important in a successful relationship with the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper. Again, the Chairman of Green's communication with the Captain is important for the latter will change annually and his enthusiasm for all things to be perfect during his year must be tempered by a degree of realism not least in matters appertaining to the golf course.

It is my belief that poor and in some cases non-existent communication is the root cause of many of the problems faced by greenkeepers and the "Augusta Syndrome" merely highlights this fact in April each year. If the relevant people are prepared to work at this vital aspect of running a golf club then there will be much less stress and heartache all round. It certainly won't resolve all the problems but it may enable those charged with the responsibility for maintaining the golf course to sleep a little better at night and even to appreciate perhaps the first joys of spring.

## Meet Lisa, BIGGA's latest recruit



Lisa Walls is the latest recruit to the BIGGA staff at Headquarters at Aldwark Manor.

Seventeen year-old Lisa joined as a clerical assistant at the beginning of March and is combining her new job with an NVQ Level 2 Business Administration Course in York.

Although currently living in Linton-on-Ouse, where her father is in the

RAF, Lisa has spent time all over the country. She has also lived abroad and was living with her family in Kuwait when Iraq invaded. Lisa was among the children met by Saddam Hussain when he attempted his infamous televised propaganda exercise.

Now back home her interests are more mundane and include horse riding, swimming, reading, dancing and singing – where her Karaoke skills will be a superb addition to the BIGGA Girls at next year's BTME.