

Land used to play golf is in good hands

I am proud to be a greenkeeper and feel privileged to be part of this vibrant and ever changing industry. I would make it very clear at this point I have never met anyone wish all the answers, that is why I am writing. By pulling together we all can be of benefit to each other and on occasions like this, share our experiences good and bad. Golf clubs have increasingly become more business like than ever before and I am always looking for new more professional and cost effective ways to prepare our golf course in tip top condition. I have, at all times, a healthy respect for the client ie the golfer, because without them wanting to play on our course I would be out of work.

Greenkeeping is, in my opinion, applying basic skills to a greater or lesser extent, depending on your course's needs at any given time. I try at all times to keep things as simple as possible! However it's not a case of black is right and white is wrong, we have to employ certain shades of grey from time to time if we are to be totally successful.

I am, as a Head Greenkeeper, totally dependent on my staff, because without their help and dedication it would be impossible to maintain and improve the condition of our course. We all must expect to earn our keep, from when we get to work to when we leave, we are a team and must perform as such. I always try to deploy staff on the course away from the golfer as this will cut down time and increase productivity. It's important that when we do come into contact with the golfer, we are able to communicate on a level pitch, there must be a mutual respect from the golfer and ourselves. Things are on the mend and greenkeepers are becoming more accepted within the club environment. Keep up the good work and remember we are all our own best ambassadors.

IRRIGATION: MY INTERPRETATION

First a story. Many years ago I was a young headstrong, Head Greenkeeper. I suppose I thought I knew everything there was to know about greenkeeping. I had just fed all the greens with Sulphate of Ammonia and Iron, one hot July day as I remember, I packed up shop and went to visit my mum and dad for the evening, some 60 miles away. We were discussing work and dad said what I'd been up to, I explained the day's work and he asked if I had given the greens a good water, I replied, "No, because it was going to rain, they'd said so on the weather forecast." "Son," he said, "it's raining when you're getting a wet head. Now get back and give them a drink." I did as I was told and, you know what, it didn't rain that night, nor for the next month, contrary to the weather forecaster's report.

Irrigation is only one of the tools available to us as greenkeepers. It's not the be and end all to successful course management, however, when well designed and maintained, it is without doubt an asset. It must be used in conjunction with a healthy aeration programme, because it would be no good throwing this valuable resource (water), onto a surface too compacted to accept it. It has great value, when we are using fertilisers, top, dressings, wetters etc, because it releases us from the constraints of the weather. If you have an automatic system (not everyone has you know) it allows you to water the course during the night removing the problem of inconvenience to the golfer and, of course, cutting down evaporative loss etc.

How much water should we use on our golf course? It's worth noting that you may experience some restriction due to cost, if coming directly from a water board or extraction limits, from a natural source on site.

Some golfers, bless them, would have us apply sufficient water that would allow a well struck 3-iron from 200 yds, to stop a ball dead. On the other hand greenkeepers have over the years, me included, applied so little amounts that the playing surface has been as receptive as an airport runway. Please remember golf is a game played on grass, not bare ground. We must apply just enough water to maintain a healthy sward and a moist soil profile, remember I said moist and not soaking. Each golf course will, in my experience, require different amounts of water to achieve this end, depending on its climate, location, topography and soil conditions. It's up to us, as the greenkeeper, to determine when and how much to achieve the best possible results.

I have over the years under used water in an effort to maintain a bent fescue dominant sward and with hindsight it may have been our cutting policies, in an effort to maintain high levels of pace for long periods and the dramatic increase, in the volume of play on our golf courses that have been the main villains.

Water is an increasingly valuable commodity, your irrigation system is an expensive tool, look after them both. It may be a stand pipe and a hose or the most expensive system around, nothing is more sure, greenkeeping would be extremely hard without them.

AGRONOMY

I don't confess to the dizzy heights of qualification of an agronomist, however have over the years met a few, I am always keen to absorb their words of wisdom. It will be of no surprise to you all, that the club committee are always pleased to have the security of their blessing, for all operations carried out on the golf course. If the agronomist is employed by your club, I am sure that you will find him or her to be more of an asset than a hindrance to your operation. Please don't be against using them as part of your team, you never know they may learn something from you, about this business at the sharp end.

In an ideal world we would all have golf courses covered with bents and fescues, no wear and tear from golf etc, however, the reality is not as simple as that. We now have levels of play on our golf courses that have walked of these ideal grasses to some extent. We all, I am sure, have to contend with poa infestation on some part of the course. The most likely situation is that we have a percentage of poa on greens and at worst we have poa dominant greens. I am not advocating that this is the best situation to find ourselves, however the reality is we have to manage what grass we have got, rather than to worry about the grass we haven't in most cases got. We have been advised over the years by some experts that creeping bentgrass will not grow well in the UK, I would just say that in my present position I am working with this grass and I must say the observation by the experts has not been true, in our case I have been very impressed by this grass. The most important factor is does the golfer like playing on it? Well again in our case they all seem very pleased with our bentgrass greens.

With golf in the region of 50 to 60 thousand

rounds being the norm, it will be of no surprise to you that soil compaction is now the main enemy. The skill is in carrying out an intensive aeration programme within the constraints of these high levels of play. Machinery manufacturers have had a great impact in making available, the tools to do this work quickly and efficiently. A well planned operation will be well received by the golfer. I know of no more unacceptable topic to the golfer – well maybe frost – if we are to have any hope of producing first class playing surfaces, the golfer will have to accept aeration, is a very necessary and rewarding operation.

I have in the main managed turn of the century greens with a heavy soil growing medium, their requirement for fertiliser, water and aeration has been worlds apart from the USGA greens that I am now managing.

If I applied the same minimum feeding policy to my USGA greens as I have used over the years on older heavy soil greens, I am sure, I would have no grass on them and I would soon be out of work. In the early years of management of a USGA green the only available nutrition is what we have applied to them and in my experience the requirement on both systems are quite different and remember we must take these factors into consideration if we are to be successful.

Golf courses over the years have had a bad press, we are told that we are a selfish user of the land and we will use pesticides at the drop of a hat. Our acres, they would have us believe, are totally void of any fauna or flora. It's crazy.

Golf is a game played through a natural landscape and we do coexist with nature in abundance. The older I get the more passionate I have become about this part of golf course management. I asked a golfer recently if he had had a good game, he replied, "My golf was xxx but the walk around this golf course was fantastic. I have seen deer, rabbits, pheasants, I have strolled through bluebell woods, I saw a heron at work and, to cap it all, the sun is shining. A perfect day."

He was, I am sure, not alone we all see things like this every day on our courses. We must, as custodians of the land we manage, embrace nature, work with it and not exclude it because it would be to the detriment of the sport. The amount of land on the golf course used to play the game in most cases is less than 60% of the total land available, leaving a sizeable amount for nature to flourish.

SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

- If you have to use pesticides, use only approved products.
- There is no need to cover out of play areas.
- Only use certificated personnel when using pesticides and comply fully with guidelines for their safe use.
- Retain local species of timber when planting.
- Compile an ecological survey you will be amazed what your course can sustain.
- Have a healthy respect for nature, the rewards are very special.

I have been afforded this opportunity to bite back and say to the pessimists, land used to play golf on is in good hands. We can and will embrace the natural landscape and preserve it into the future.