

Continuing education: essential for us all

A number of Head Greenkeepers and Course Managers could be doing far more to help in the training and development of their staff, believes Nick Bisset, head of horticulture at Askham Bryan College, York.

As a first step along this path, Nick is looking for a major improvement in communications and a greater willingness by experienced turf professionals to share their knowledge, helping close the gap which he feels has developed between many managers and their staff.

Nick Bisset's observations stem from 20 years' experience with students attending block and day release greenkeeping and sports turf courses at the college, which is a BIGGA-recognised regional centre for greenkeeper training.

"Many of the trainees we see each year display a serious lack of knowledge in the most basic areas," he explained. "They come to us supposedly with some greenkeeping experience but it is obvious from their comments that important information and advice is simply not filtering down from the top."

But it is not just in the areas of turf grass management and course maintenance where Nick Bisset wants better communications.

"It is alarming just how little is known by some students about the club where they are employed," he pointed out. "Facts such as the number of members and rounds of golf played each year, the timing of important competitions and the age and design of the course is key information for any aspiring greenkeeper, influencing a whole range of jobs such as fertilising, spraying, aeration, hollow coring and top dressing. Better understanding can only stimulate greater interest in the work, leading to improved performance and results."

Nick stressed that head greenkeepers and course managers should make a point of talking frequently and openly with their staff. "It is vital that anyone allocated a specific course maintenance task is shown how to do it properly. Yet it is equally important that the person understands why it is necessary, why he or she



Sharing of knowledge will help make staff feel more involved, leading to a happier workplace and a better maintained golf course



Never assume that staff know why a specific turf maintenance task is necessary and how it should be carried out. Better education will produce better results

has been asked to do it a particular way and what benefits are expected."

By sharing their knowledge, experienced greenkeepers, managers and turf professionals will, he says, help make their staff feel more involved. This, in turn, will stimulate positive feedback, comments and suggestions, leading to a happier workplace and a better maintained golf course.

"All we can do at colleges such as Askham Bryan is provide students with the facts," pointed out Nick. "Armed with these, they can start making decisions and forming their own opinions. However, they cannot be expected to do it alone. They need continuing encouragement and education at the workplace."

Classroom discussions have revealed that the majority of managers take for granted the

fact that their staff know why they are doing a particular job. "This is a dangerous assumption," commented Nick. "Fear of being laughed at can make even the most able trainee clam up and not ask for help or advice."

"I believe the best approach is for the head greenkeeper to talk regularly to everyone about the specific management and maintenance actions being planned and carried out on the course. This can be done through a general briefing or individually for those who prefer a one to one approach."

While applauding the many clubs which encourage formal education for trainee greenkeepers, Nick stressed that there is an accompanying need for continuing training for more experienced people.

"New ideas and techniques appear with ever-increasing frequency and keeping up to date with the latest developments can be a problem, even for college lecturers," he observed. "Supplier open days, manufacturer demonstrations, trade journals, STRI bulletins and BIGGA conferences and courses are able to provide a wealth of information which no golf greenkeeper should ignore. Any club wishing to advance its standards of course management and maintenance ought to pro-

vide their staff with the means and the time to take advantage of the opportunities available."

In addition to its published programme, many colleges are happy also to lay on specialist courses if there is sufficient demand. Askham Bryan was asked recently if it did anything on golf course design and was promised six students if a specialist course was provided.

Having found a qualified lecturer, the college will be presenting its very first two day session on the subject next winter with places available for a further six students on the course. "First come, first served," notes Nick Bisset.

To support and advance the current level of education available to experienced and trainee greenkeepers, Nick says he would like to see a regular series of regional technical meetings, targeted at everyone within a golf club having responsibility for the management and upkeep of the course.

"Continuing education should not stop simply at those who maintain the course or service machines," he commented. "Club secretaries and chairmen of greens also need to understand why certain operations have to be carried out at specific times of the year, why they are necessary and what equipment is required."

"The majority of clubs want to see their course being well used by members and visitors throughout the year. At the same time, they want it presented in perfect condition, yet the two situations do not always sit comfortably together. Bringing everyone together within an educational or training forum should produce a better understanding throughout the club leading to greater harmony and improved playing conditions."

"BIGGA has made a great start with its chairmen of greens and secretaries course at the BTME event in Harrogate. I would like to see such sessions extended nationwide throughout the year."

■ Nick Bisset can be contacted at Askham Bryan College, York. Tel: 01904 702121. Many thanks to Coventry Golf Club for assistance with the photographs used to illustrate this article.