



Gordon Irvine competes for business against some of the top clubs in the country but his traditional methods coupled with a vigorous Fescue overseeding programme means he can do so at a fraction of the cost.

In praise of fescue

Mill Ride Golf Club has all the trappings of luxury needed for a club which shares a postal address with one of the most famous and prestigious race courses in the world and whose closest golfing neighbours are a little matter of Wentworth, Sunningdale, The Berkshire and Swinley Forest.

Its membership includes many who are also members of that big four as well as some of the most famous sportsmen in the country. It is also on the hit list of some of the country's top blue chip companies as a potential venue for a corporate day.

Yet the Ascot-based club is run on a tight budget, with a greenkeeping staff of just six, by a man who has jumped the great divide from Course Manager to General Manager.

In praise of fescue



Above: Gordon Irvine, General Manager, Mill Ride GC

Below: This attractive lake is a feature of the Mill Ride Course

Gordon Irvine's pedigree is second to none. He is a Master Greenkeeper, was the youngest ever Premier Greenkeeper in '94 and is regarded as one of the most eloquent and intelligent men in the profession. Presented with the opportunity of running the whole club by its Asian owners he has taken on the additional duties with the same verve as he continues to run the golf course.

Gordon has been at Mill Ride since he left Turnberry to become Clerk of Works on the construction of the course.

"Everyone at home nearly disowned me. Imagine leaving a Scottish links course and moving to the heartland of England, for heaven's sake. They thought I'd flipped and gone chasing money," he recalled with a laugh.

In fact the reason he left Turnberry and moved to the stockbroker belt of the Home Counties was purely greenkeeper based.

"I was particularly interested in what was being done here. A golf course specification designed to be British, and recognised as British, at a time, when it would have to compete against some very big American courses being built around the same time."

Pressed on what he meant by a British specification Gordon elaborated.

"A modern British design and construction which was an imitation links green specification, with drainage as the most important factor. The course was also built with British materials; designed by a British architect, Donald Steel; built by a British constructor, Brian Pierson, and with a British agronomist in Jim Arthur."

It was Gordon's conviction that Mill Ride would be able to compete with other new clubs including The London Club and The Wisley which were in the same catchment area.

"I firmly believed that through time our course would be as good as the others, for a fraction of the cost - using traditional British greenkeeping skills."

"After all we gave the game of golf to the world and set the standards for maintenance over the generations."

"British greenkeeping has developed over the years. People have their own way of interpreting what they want to do, while others go off at tangents, but it normally comes back to the same principals," said Gordon, talking the day after an English golf writer had holed-in-one at the 15th hole at Mill Ride, during a golf day organised for the England football squad and winning himself a £189,000 Lamborghini sports car.

Gordon's current maintenance programme was introduced following a

bout of Take-All Patch disease a year after the course opened.

Those grey days tested his resolve and principles to the limit.

"Against my wishes but for understandable commercial reasons, the owners had specified that the greens at Mill Ride be turfed. My feeling was that the Yorkshire soil in which the turf was grown, placed on top of the high pH root zone, with an irrigation water source which also had a high pH, created a situation which made disease a potential problem at a time when club finances were tight with greater and greater demands being placed on the golf course."

"Fortunately the grasses used were Colonial Bent and Fescues because by the time the disease was finished there was no Bent left and all we had was a very thin Fescue sward, very much open to attack by Annual Meadow Grass invasion."

The solution involved long discussions with Jim Arthur and Barenbrug, who supply the seed mixes for Mill Ride, and between them they decided that the best policy was to introduce an overseeding programme using Fescue as the main species with a later injection of Bent when the greens were ready for Bent grass growth.

"That raised a lot of eyebrows in the area because Fescue is not a grass which is particularly well thought of inland. It was felt that it wouldn't cope with the wear and tear," explained Gordon.

"What wasn't understood, though, was that the decision had to be taken on what the greens would take, as at that point, there was no guarantee that the disease, which was still active in the area, wouldn't come back the following summer."

"So we went straight in with a



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100% Fescue mix and overseeded and we had Fescue growing and germinating in the middle of the diseased areas," explained Gordon with a degree of pride.

"The putting surfaces which we subsequently produced were great. I remember having greens with a height of cut at just under six mils running at nine and a half on the stimp...not that I ever told Jim I was using a stimp! It was like being back on the links again. The greens have an excellent cover of Fescue grass, regularly top dressed and bleached by the sun."

Gordon's view is that sometimes greens are cut so low that the ball is actually running on the ground and, if it isn't perfectly smooth, it bobbles and jumps.

"We had the ball running on the vegetation which meant that we got a wonderful roll and our putting surfaces were incredible. But the golfers kept coming up with the view that they were hairy," he recalled ruefully.

From an agronomic perspective Gordon was convinced that he had access to the best possible advice.

"I have the utmost respect for Jim Arthur and think he's an unsung hero in the industry. A lot of people have known him a lot longer than me but I'm one of the few people who actually worked with him, as this was the last project he worked on before retiring. He spent a lot of time here 'hands-on' and I learned from him."

"You hear all about stressing meadow grass, but he actually showed me how to go about doing it and still have a golf green at the end of it," he said.

However, it was the fact that the greens, despite putting beautifully, were perceived as too hairy that kept Gordon's bathroom cabinet well

stocked up with headache tablets and resulted in him spending as much time thinking politics as he was thinking agronomy.

"In this part of the world it is very much the standard routine to shave greens as low as machines can and the speed of green that can be achieved is frightening. It is what golfers have learned to expect and they have the power to insist. Some day they may link their demands for summer speed to the forced use of temporary greens in the winter, with fungicide becoming a costly monthly expense, but until then it will always be a battle."

"Greenkeepers want to be able to go home and sleep at night. They want to come into work and not have people continually chasing them and complaining," said Gordon, adding that it took only a fraction of a change in cutting height to keep the golfers happy.

"That fraction, however, is critical in the growing of quality turf especially with the growing demand for winter play.

"The thing that worried me was that we were competing with the bigger clubs, with whom we shared members, and it was difficult to say to golfers 'What I'm doing is what we should do and what the other clubs are doing is wrong...and by the way I know you prefer what they're doing'. You can see the problem."

It was a battle he was bound to lose as he realised that if he was to continue down his chosen path it was going to be a struggle and would cause problems for him personally and for the club financially.

"I was answerable to a Board of Directors made up of people who were golfers themselves and members of clubs with fast, shaved greens with soft surfaces and receptive to their standard of shot."

Gordon knew that he could buy himself time, but in the long run there was only one winner.

"You can soften the blow by saying 'I'm the Course Manager and I know best'. You might be listened to, it's doubtful but you might. You can go

out and collect a Premier Greenkeeper Award and that might get you through an overseeding programme. Tell them you're a Master Greenkeeper and you'll get more space because they're more wary about taking you on."

"But ultimately the financial people don't want to be telling the customer excuses. They want the customer to be telling them how good the product is. But if the product is being judged against other products unfairly it is very difficult," explained Gordon.

He came under more and more pressure to reduce the height of cut and eventually he took the decision to move from using pure Fescue to using a Bent/Fescue mix which has taken the greens from being 70% Fescue to the present day position of being nearly 60% Agrostis.

"It was a conscious decision which had to be taken, although I personally prefer the Fescue greens...but they never stood a chance and weren't wanted."

Gordon feels that it is not just the



at a stroke.



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In praise of fescue

golfers who shy away from Fescue, greenkeepers have also given the grass an unjustified bad name, some now favouring American bred grasses with no history of success in place of grass which has stood the test of time.

"There was a lot of scaremongering about how Fescue disappeared overnight. I've heard all the stories but I think it's a sad fact that the grass just doesn't get the credit it deserves because it can undoubtedly give you a good fast surface at a higher height of cut. I believe in the future it will have to be used more for environmental reasons."

Gordon also advocates the use of Fescue for fairways.

"It takes very little to maintain them in the summer as they don't need much cutting and very little feeding. We run Mill Ride with a greenkeeping staff of six and, despite less than 300 members, we make a profit because our maintenance bills are so small," he said.

"I'm one of their worst customers," he added, pointing to the Grass Roots rep who happened to be visiting at the time.

The initial attempts at overseeding were, by his own admission, miserable and resulted in him making a study of how best to achieve success.

"I wanted to know why overseeding was so hit or miss. I know some guys who would hollow core to a depth of two inches and put seed into the holes. Obviously this wasn't going to work. Others would fill the holes to the surface, then dust seed on the surface and then lightly top dress. That had a chance but all I could think was that you had all these hollow cores just waiting for meadow grass.

"So I studied the subject further and I looked at various machines before deciding on the one I wanted to use. It was a slit seeder which would enable us to inject the seed into and

below the surface and close the surface which was the key as it prevented the meadow grass getting in."

Having taken over as General Manager two years ago Gordon is paradoxically convinced that it has allowed him to become a better Course Manager.

"A lot of people don't think you can be General Manager and stay in greenkeeping but what they don't understand is that I write my own diary. If I need to spend six or seven hours on the course I do it because I ensure that the time is in the diary."

Another advantage is that Gordon can ensure that the course gets consideration when corporate events are being scheduled.

"Our Corporate Events Organiser will tell me about events which are being considered and ask me if we can take them. I'll look at the diary and say that the week they were thinking about is earmarked for maintenance and, although open to members, it would be closed to bigger events."

"On the up side, what I can say is when the course is going to be in fantastic condition and that clients should be guided to that time. This way essential maintenance can take place in harmony with an economic need to have a busy golf course."

Gordon's time is split about 60% General Manager duties and 40% Course Manager duties.

"I always take the dog a walk over the course first thing in the morning to get a picture of how it's looking. I've got a wonderful Head Greenkeeper, Mike Holland, whose priorities are to keep all areas cut and tidy and to the standard that I've set him. I'll say when we're going to groom, what height of cut, when we're going to overseed and what seed or fertiliser we're going to buy, all long term greenkeeping practices. He must then carry them out but within a time



frame that is most realistic considering the weather etc.

"I manage all the irrigation in the evenings. I often spend three or four hours on the course as it's a wonderful chance to see that everything is the way it should be. Irrigation is the critical maintenance procedure for good greenkeeping. I like to imitate a heavy dew backed up with hand watering and that's about it, so if I tell a sprinkler to go off I don't want it to go off three or four minutes later. I want it off straight away."

Talking with and listening to Gordon, you are left with the impres-

sion of a man who loves his job and has a real passion for the industry.

"What I'm most proud of is that I could leave here tomorrow and know that whoever took over would be inheriting something that was very honest that he could work with. I work an open book policy and I've not been spraying fungicide every two weeks for the last six months just to keep it alive, or growing silage. I believe my job is to producing playing surface for all year enjoyment with nature as my friend not my enemy. This way I can please both golfer and Bank Manager."



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