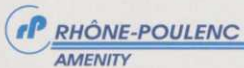


ECOLOGICAL EXCELLENCE

As one of the judges in this year's competition, Bob Taylor B.Sc, Ecologist at The Sports Turf Research Institute had an ideal opportunity to examine some of the excellent courses on offer.



1998 has been another exceptional year with regard to the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition and our thanks must once again go out to the sponsors, Rhone-Poulenc Amenity and Amazone UK Ltd for their continued support. Without them the competition would not exist and the considerable level of awareness and interest now running through the golf industry with regard to environmental issues would be greatly diminished.

When visiting golf courses within all aspects of my work I do from time to time come across negative criticisms suggesting, for example, that golf courses are for playing golf and are not nature reserves. This negativity, however, does very little to win the support of local planners, conservationists, etc, many of which now realise that golf is a major and important land use, supporting a variety of different habitat types, all of which add value for wildlife.

An equally important point is that golf throughout Europe is facing a relatively bleak future, particularly given the way in which restrictions are now being imposed on the use of pesticides, ie herbicides, fungicides, etc, on which we all at certain times must depend. In

Sweden, for example, there is now only one fungicide with a seal of approval for combating Fusarium. Rovral Green marketed through Rhone Poulenc still produces good effect but should the disease become resistant at any time (which is highly likely) then Sweden, or at least golf in Sweden, is likely to be up the proverbial fjord, so to speak.

If we in Britain can show that we do manage sympathetically recognising the importance of golf and showing that it can offer a major contribution to our wider countryside, then just perhaps we can hold back the inevitable tide of change and win acceptance from potential critics, ie those who see golf as a negative form of land use. Given the above, I do feel that the golf industry does owe quite a lot to the sponsors in bringing and raising the level of awareness through the golf industry to where it is today.

1998 saw a total of 42 entrants, 35 of which were

new applicants. These range from highly prestigious sites such as the St. Andrews Links to relatively new pay and play courses such as Oulton Park in Leeds. It is clearly good news to see that all Clubs at all levels are entering. Whatever the status, prestige or habitat format, all have an equal chance of winning the competition just as previous winners have shown.

The competition this year was judged in a similar manner to 1997. In the initial scoring stages it was important to determine what kind of backing the greenstaff receive from the management as clearly without this it would be difficult to progress. Other considerations were given to types of work being undertaken and as to whether these would benefit the wider landscape.

Questions were asked as to the greenstaffs knowledge and enthusiasm and whether this was appropriate for the types of work being implemented. Consideration was also given to other conservation projects, ie bat surveys, bird boxes or other innovative strategies that may be in place to elevate the conservation status of the course.

Following the above, a selection of courses were visited. A general walk-over gave me the opportunity to ask questions of the management programme and to evaluate aspects of the recently formed Committed to Green strategy. Included here would be a Club's water resource, turfgrass and waste management policies with particular emphasis being given to grass clippings. Conservation, communication and indeed support towards education and training of the greenstaff were also considered.

Having assessed at this level, obtaining considerable information from each Club, it became even more difficult in choosing the finalists. I suppose at this stage I should point out that all of the Clubs entering are, by and large, worthy winners, simply due to the fact that they are proud to show their environmental interests. Given the above, the judging process becomes an academic exercise for the purpose of the competition.

Rigorous selection this year narrowed the field to the following finalists:

In Scotland - Linlithgow (regional winner for the past three years), Kilmacollm, Loch Lomond, with Cardross and Hilton Park and Torphin Hill following close behind.

In northern England - Lindrick and Oulton Park (Leeds) were followed closely by Hesketh, Carden Park and Ilkley.

In Wales we had an excellent response but the eventual field nar-

rowed to accommodate Royal Porthcawl, Pennard, Pyle & Kenfig, Trefloyno and Carmarthen.

In the Midland region - Burnham Beeches and Mid Herts Golf Clubs were selected to run to the final stages.

In the south - Thorpeness, Frinton and The Dyke Golf Clubs were selected and in the south west, Broadstone was chosen.

With the help of Dr Peter Hayes (retired Director, STRI) standing in for Dr Keith Duff, Chief Scientist with English Nature, the regional finalists and the overall winner were determined. The regional finalists were as follows:

Scotland - Loch Lomond Golf Club

Although the construction of Loch Lomond has necessitated the removal of many established trees in an area of outstanding natural beauty, the areas of rough, many of which are now dominated with soft rush, whilst penalising ball retrieval, do certainly create real opportunities for birds such as the reed bunting which is a scarce bird identified for priority help within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Loch Lomond in recognising the sensitivity of the site, appointed a Nature Conservation Officer to deal with the day to day rough management which must be recognised as a very progressive approach and one which all Clubs could do well in following (OK, all Clubs don't have the resources, but I am talking in ideals now). I am sure that in the relatively near future such initiatives will be commonplace.

Wales Royal Porthcawl Golf Club

Considerable effort has been made at Royal Porthcawl in reinstating the boundary walls, creating habitat for stoat, weasel, rodents, insects and birds such as the pied wagtail, for example. Heather, gorse/broom and rough grassland management are all now being considered and have been documented in a longer term management plan outlining the main areas of work which will be implemented on a phased and ongoing basis.

South West Broadstone Golf Club

Considerable attention at Broadstone has been given to reinstating the heath by tree removal and heather management. Although still in the early stages, the Club is keen to trial the different approaches to this work. Much of Broadstone is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and the man-

Below: The characteristic Loch Lomond dock leaf



Right: Phased water management of the water feature at Royal Porthcawl

agement given follows closely the guidelines set out by English Nature.

The South - The Dyke Golf Club
The Dyke Golf Club by its presence has secured an important fragment of the downland, much of which, certainly that surrounding the golf course, is now being managed as intensive agriculture. Area of acidic grassland can be seen amongst the dominant chalk rich grassland. Round-headed rampion or Pride of Sussex is an interesting plant species to be found here, surviving only in one or two areas of the South Downs. Much of the greenstaff's time in the winter is spent coppicing and controlling hawthorn regeneration. Glades have been created so as to maximise the grassland habitat for butterflies and other wildlife; the roughs are generally managed for their botanical interest, although several are left to facilitate overwintering.

Midland Mid Herts Golf Club

The decision between Mid Herts and Burnham Beeches was very difficult, although Mid Herts was possibly slightly more ahead in terms of how much work has been undertaken on the course with regard to rough management. Emphasis is largely given to developing the grassland roughs providing attractive swathes throughout the summer period. Heather is present in one or two pockets and efforts are being made to encourage this further. A programme is also underway to conserve and increase juniper which is present on the course but is generally rare within the surrounding countryside. The Club maintains a regular liaison with the Middlesex Trust for Wildlife who often offer labour to assist with the project.

The North

The overall winner of the 1998 Environment Competition this year came from the North. Lindrick Golf Club have always been serious contenders, receiving Highly Commended and Regional Finalist awards.

The judges were particularly impressed with the degree of commitment and enthusiasm that clearly runs throughout the Club towards ecological management. Areas of the course have been given Site of Special Scientific Interest status and as such are managed with guidance from English Nature and the local Wildlife Trust. Other areas outside the areas of SSSI are managed in a similar manner so as to maximise habitat and species interest. The work undertaken has included a substantial amount of gorse management and rein-



statement of the rough grassland. The Club has also developed a wildlife pond which now forms an important feature on entering the course.

In response to winning the Regional Finalist award, David Ward, Course Manager at Royal Porthcawl Golf Club states that: "The winning of the award has certainly created a buzz through the Club and has helped considerably in highlighting our environmental profile. It has made members much more aware of what we are trying to achieve out on the course." Similarly, David Ansell of The Dyke Golf Club says that: "Entering the competition has helped the role of communication between members, particularly given that the judging has been carried out by external groups, i.e. with no internal bias to the Club. The level of interest now present within the Club will allow more scope for the greenstaff to address those more sensitive areas that previously lacked positive management."

Mr Richard Jourdan, Secretary of Mid Herts Golf Club pointed out that the Club was highly delighted with the award. The plaque has been placed within the Clubhouse and full coverage has been given to the award in the Mid Herts Golfer Newsletter. "One of the major attributes of the competition is to raise the awareness through the membership as to what we are trying to achieve out on the course."



Above right: Swans at Loch Lomond perfect their bunker play!

Right: Reinstating gorse at Broadstone

