

Sandy McDivot, Head Greenkeeper at Sludgecombe Pay and Play, discusses the pros and cons of consultants, and outlines how to get advice from them...

Field of experience?

There is, in this world, a boom industry that seems to be for ever growing. It may not lay claim to being the oldest profession as that particular tag has apparently been applied to some other vocation but it may lay claim to being the second. One can imagine the scenario; Neanderthal man decides to go into business selling a particular product or service. As soon as they find their first punter and manage to tell of their successes there appears from out of the woodwork someone that says, "Sure you're doing it that way, but if you do it this way you can treble your profits in the first two weeks and what's more I will only take 10% to

start with." I am, of course, talking of the consultant.

In our industry we have a veritable profusion of these that come under the heading of Golf Course Agronomists. In the old days there were but a tiny few in number. Take away Uncle Jim who appears to have been going for several centuries now and a few at Bingley and there was nothing to chose from. But over the years as golf has increased in popularity it seems as though every Dave, Jack and George is setting up business as an expert in the field.

The problem would appear to be that there are so many differing ways of going about the task of maintaining a golf course and indeed so many different types of course. We used to have the old push up golf course that was built decades ago out of what ever was at hand. Now we have the sand based construction and all its derivations. Some advise a lean and hungry approach, others are more willing to use every type of nutrient going in an effort to keep optimum

growth of the grass. Many have there own particular secret that they apply to all courses while others are willing to use any golf course as a kind of laboratory in which to carry out their trials of a new theory that they may have.

There is one thing that puzzles me about the increase in agronomists over the years. It appears to be a peculiar paradox that in the old days when to be quite honest there was nothing like the knowledge of greenkeeping that there is now, there appears to be a greater demand for the adviser. I mean lets face it, when I came into greenkeeping many years ago there was little in the way of education, and nothing in the way of available information compared to nowadays. Some of the Head Greenkeepers that I used to work for knew about as much about greenkeeping as I do about nuclear physics. First year students of nowadays would wipe the floor with some and I stress some of those old Head Greenkeepers whose standard qualification would be to talk with a strange provincial dialect and to be able to wield a scythe. In those thankfully far off days I could well understand committees bringing in advisers every so often so as to give the man in charge a rough idea of what a golf course should look like. But these days it appears that despite the relative huge improvement in knowledge and understanding, the agronomists are as busy as ever. I can only put this strange anomaly down to a sign of the times. I do not think it is a lack of trust but just a general acceptance that consultants are called in for anything that would appear to the present day layman as being in the least bit technical. That would explain why secretaries, stewards and pros do not have their own consultants brought in, ie their jobs are not in the least bit technical.

So what type of agronomists are there. Well broadly I have worked out that they fall into four main groups



1) those who take advice. 2) those who do not give advice. 3) those who give advice. 4) Those who give bad advice.

The best of these for Head Greenkeepers is the first of these ie those who take advice. If you're lucky enough to get one of these agronomists then your whole quality of life can be improved. This is the agronomist who comes along to your course once or twice a year and wanders round while you tell him what you have been doing, what you intend to do and why. He then goes back to his HQ and writes up a report detailing exactly what you have said. Everyone is happy. He's happy as he gets regular employment, you're happy as you get back up and the committee are happy as they get a nice, neat report full of technicalities that they will never understand. If you're very lucky you can actually get this type of agronomist to ask the question "do you wish me to put any of the following in my report a) new machinery, b) new staff, c) all expenses trip to GCSAA annual bash etc...?" Marvellous, and yet so simple.

Then we have the second type of agronomist, those that give no advice. This type can be a very useful stress relieving tool for the present day greenkeeper. As we all know, in order to achieve good results in the long term, we have to endure bad results in the short term. Aeration, top dressing, scarification, feeding you name it, they all result in a temporary deterioration in quality. This is when the above agronomist comes in to his own. The committee or the members ask the perennial question "why do you have to do that just when the greens were getting nice?" to which the greenkeeper can reply "because the agronomist says so" and there on the agronomists report is written hollow time and top dress in the spring, apply 8:0:0 in the summer etc... etc....

Now this to the average greenkeeper is not exactly an earth shattering new theory on the maintenance of fine turf but it does keep the uneducated masses that like to clutter up our fairways, happy that their overpaid Head Greenkeeper is getting useful guidance. There is an additional advantage to be gained from this type of agronomist in that his report contains just enough jargon to keep the golfers respect of their greenkeepers. After all there are not many committee men or ladies, let alone plebeian members who have an earthly of what 8:0:0 is.

The third type of agronomist can be a little more dangerous. This type like to get above their status and give us advice on how to do things. Don't get me wrong, it can be well meaning advice but because they have never been greenkeepers themselves it can be totally impractical. Let me give you an example. I have got a report from an agronomist that advises I hollow time my greens and fill up the holes with pure sand to 5mm from the surface. I then top dress to the surface with regular 80:20 so as to facilitate an overseeding programme. Now I am not sure what planet this particular agronomist was on and what sort of gravitational pull it has, but here on

Earth one cannot simply back fill with sand to 5mm of the surface. Some holes get filled up and others are left pretty much empty, which ever way one does it. So we top dressed with plenty of sand and they all filled up right to the surface. It was the only thing that was practical. At Sludgecombe Pay and Play I am blessed with a couple of owners whose only interest in my department is the spending side, I have no greens committees to worry about and so this sort of report does me no harm what so ever. However at clubs that have those dreadful committee members that want to get involved, it could be a problem. They may insist that the agronomists advice is followed to the letter and ask searching questions when it is not.

The fourth type of agronomist is the worst and, I am glad to say, a relatively rare breed. These are the ones who not only insist on giving advice but give bad advice. For example I have heard of a so called agronomist that basically advises severe monthly scarification followed by a heavy, pure sand top dressing. He claims that slit tining does no good what so ever and has a fervent belief in applying vast quantities of calcified seaweed. The problem is, he peddles these theories directly to the greens committees and course owners and they being complete laymen when it comes to turf maintenance fall for his smooth verbal delivery and outlandish claims. In one case where a friend of mine was involved, the course owner accused my friend of trying to pull the wool over his eyes when he disagreed with this particular agronomists advice. The result was the owner took side with the agronomist and my friend found it necessary to find employment elsewhere which I am glad to say he did successfully.

In another case, previously documented in this magazine, the committee forced the Head Greenkeeper to action this same agronomists advice. As this course was a prestigious links course with associated fine turf it was not long before the regular scarifications, sand smothering and huge pH increases from the calcified seaweed took its toll and the greens effectively gave up the ghost and died. However, as is so often the case, the committee once again took the side of the agronomist and the Head Greenkeeper was given the blame and the sack. He managed to get a favourable settlement but such a blow can destroy a career for good.

I must not however get too cynical about agronomists. As I wrote earlier they can and often are, a great asset to the greenkeeper. However, I think the fundamental problem with them is that they are called in by committees once or twice a year to advise and often advice is the last thing that is needed. Sometimes its best just to keep things simple and let the greenkeepers get on with it and the best agronomists are the ones that in the right circumstances do just that. So if you're looking for a good agronomist that can help you, then my advice would be to look around, look at there track history, talk to other greenkeepers that have used them and, remember, they are there to help us.

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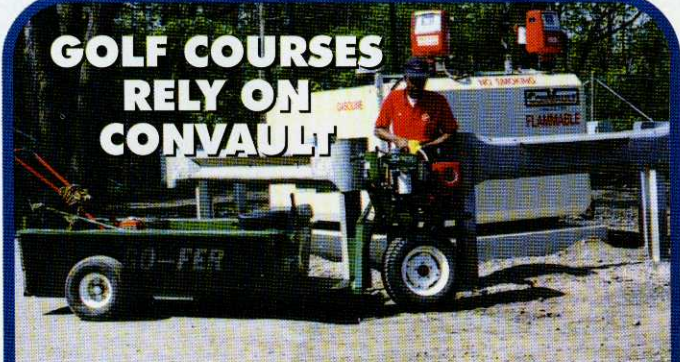
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