

**This month I would like to turn my attention to a greenkeeping matter. This is something I have always endeavoured to stay clear of. After all what do I know about greenkeeping? In fact what do any of us know about greenkeeping?**

# Sand Green. Destruction

I still wince at a memory I have of once playing golf at a course with the most perfect fescue greens the world has ever known. Desperate to meet the genius responsible for these greens I located him and started the interrogation. "What fertiliser do you use" I asked. "Is the N source derived from aerobically composted organic matter?" "Oh I don't know much about that," came the reply. "I'm sure we used some back in the spring but I'm not sure which." "But what about your aeration technique? Do you deploy the high pressure water injection method?" I enquired. "The what?" came the reply.

As my questions became more and more fevered in a desperate attempt to learn the secrets in his possession, so his answers became shorter and shorter until I was confronted with a series of incoherent grunting noises. At this point the truth dawned on me. Here I was attempting some sort of communication with the man that I was sure had information on the most advanced and detailed turf management methods in the known universe and yet in reality he was a couple of chromosomes from being the village idiot. Depressing, is it not?

But to get back to the greenkeeping matter in question. I recently played a course in my area, which had 17 excellent healthy greens and one green that looked close to giving up its battle with life. This

green although dominated with fine fescue grass was weak, patchy, full of pitch and spike marks, slow to putt on and generally not too well. It was the only green on the course, which was built to a sand based or USGA specification method, and this brings me to the greenkeeping matter I would like to discuss.

After decades of initial research, experimentation, fine tuning and quite literally thousands of working examples we have evolved a method of greens construction that one would expect to be about perfect. Having worked with such greens for several years now at Sludgecombe Pay and Play I have come to the conclusion that the people who invented them are having a laugh. Either that or I am a bigger idiot than I thought.

To start with, USGA spec greens perform brilliantly. The grass is quick to establish and drainage is incredible. You get a rapid poa annua free sward and the members believe you to be God. The problems start when golfers feel the time is right to start playing on them. I should have had my suspicions when the first ball landed on the 1st green and left a huge splat of a pitch mark that required several minutes of delicate surgery in which to repair. Then to my horror I noticed a mass of spike marks appearing around the hole. I was not used to this on my previous clubs 100 year old greens. But never mind I thought, recovery

would be quick and complete. How naive I was. Recovery came only after the application of what I considered to be obscene quantities of fertiliser and as we were now coming into the autumn this was against everything I had previously been taught.

So I was now left with the dilemma, do I feed those suckers as all the reps were telling me to do, or do I leave them to die under the mass of overweight golfers desperate to destroy my once beautiful greens. The problem was the speed in which all colour and growth disappears from them. One minute you have Florida in England, then the next it looks as though someone's gone out and sprayed growth retardant at quadruple rate. Eventually I bowed under the pressure coming at me from every angle and resorted to the fertiliser bag and the inevitable fusarium attack, which followed. So then I was out there spraying copious quantities of hugely expensive fungicides while still desperately trying to keep something resembling grass on the surface.

But there must be a plus side I hear you say. What about aeration, surely that is not required in such intensity? Don't you believe it. When do you come across black layer on those old established soil greens? You have got to do as much if not more of that operation that annoys golfers than any established greens. If you do not, they puddle



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up, turn a horrible brown colour and exude noxious fumes when ever you attempt a hole change which should be after every other fourball given the spike mark problems.

Now you may call me a whinging old git but I have not finished yet, not by a long shot. Further problems arise when you are forced to close the course due to the wear received on them. "But we have spent all this money on getting the very best construction so as to keep them open," say the owners. But grass does not grow in the winter whatever the soil underneath. To keep the course open, temporaries are hastily built so the seniors can get their daily inoculation of golf. Then the ladies complain to you through the February blizzard saying "Don't you know we've got our second mid week medal on today?" when you are forced to bring into play a temporary green or two. Then there is thatch build up. You may think this to be impossible given the free draining nature of the root zone but remember, for the first few years the sandy soil is devoid of those loveable little bugs that break thatch down, especially if you have been killing them off with fungicide.

Now given that

you come out of the winter with disease scarred, worn out, pitch marked, thatchy efforts masquerading as greens what grass do you think comes in to the gaping holes after the first application of spring fertiliser? Yes that's right annual meadow grass. But not the poa annua that we have come to accept with all its innocuous little faults. No, this is a huge, ugly, monstrous carbuncle type of poa annua that possesses several hundred permanent seed heads on every conspicuous tuft. You might as well plant flashing neon lights given the way it blends into the rest of the sward.

McDivot, you whinging old git I here you say again. But there is more, quite a lot more as it happens. Just when you think you are getting the hang of them, the poa is blending in a bit, the bugs are now starting to multiply and breaking down the thatch and you can actually get a reasonable amount of nutrient retention, suddenly you get a visit from the dreaded Take All Patch.

When I got this disease all over my greens I immediately buried myself in the textbooks and they all said the same thing; I was stuffed. Sure you could think about a hugely expensive acid injection system, or you could add phosphate, which encourages the poa, or you can throw on vast quantities of manganese which probably won't make any difference but basically you are well and truly stuffed.

The only thing to do is wait the two or three

years for it to go on its own. In the mean time the members think you are deliberately doing nothing about what they believe to be a virulent form of ringworm on their greens. Actually between you and me there is something you can do if you have Take All Patch. Go to one of those old clubs that still has a store of that highly illegal mercury based fungicide.

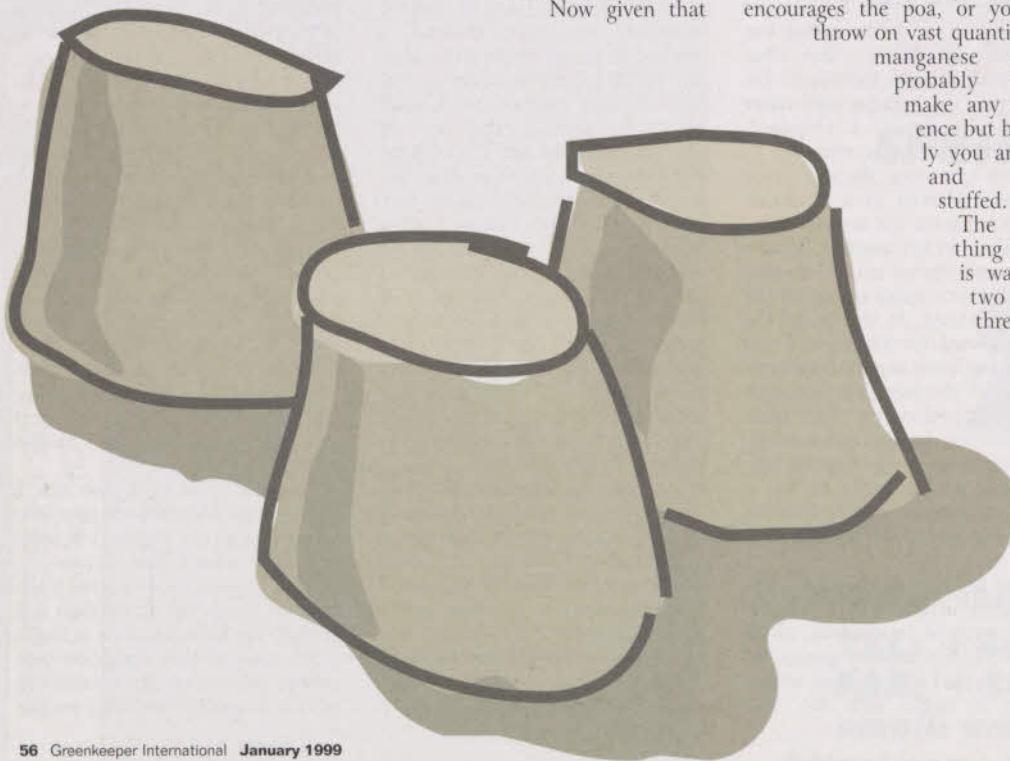
Having obtained some, don't bother spraying it on your greens, just drink it neat. At least it will put you out of your misery quickly. Either that or resort to that traditional old remedy - the bottle. Then when the disease goes by itself, you will only have chronic alcohol dependency to cure, which should be an absolute doddle, compared to Take All Patch.

You may say that I am a whinging old git but wait, let's look at how to cure some of these problems. Firstly there is the spike mark problem.

(Are the perpetrators of sand based greens in collusion with the soft spike manufacturers?) Do not think that this problem is still associated with creeping bent grass greens because mine are bent/fescue and I still have greens that are ridden with ruinous spiked up areas following the first swathe of daily fourballs.

In an effort to solve this problem of global proportions I rang up the STRI. What has their extensive research on the subject revealed? Well actually it appeared that no such research was being done (please correct me if I am wrong STRI). "It could be verticutting," they said to me. "Are you doing enough?" "Well I used to double verticut every other week and the spike marks were deplorable" I told them. "Are you doing too much they enquired?" "Well I now do no verticutting whatsoever and the spike marks are deplorable" I replied. So there is no answer there. But how about soft spikes, that will solve the problem. Well maybe, but I want to solve the problem on the surface of the green. After all links greens are effectively built on sand and they do not spike up so why do mine.

The question of soft spikes has even come up on TV's "Watchdog" programme; clubs are now banning people from their course without them. Well I don't





know about you but I would not like to be charged £6 for a round of golf and have all my spikes changed over. After all I'm a greenkeeper! No, it seems to me this whole matter is getting totally out of hand. Surely there is an answer.

In recent months we had a golf course on the telly with limited golf, highly expensive sand based greens, a very intelligent Course Manager that had access to the best information and he had greens that looked like they had been in a war zone. A short while later we went to The Open at Royal Birkdale only to be confronted with greens that were as perfect at the end of the day as at the beginning. Yes the greens were sand based and fairly newly constructed but the turf was re-laid from the old greens.

Perhaps that was the answer; it is the grass on top that counts. If that is the case, then why are seed companies not collecting this elixir of the turf world at our best courses and growing it on ready for wholesale distribution? I know a great deal of it was poa annua but at other heavily played links and even parkland courses the grass is dominated by bent and fescue species and spiking up is not a problem. Then look at Birkdale's Chris Whittle's account of his own greens in this magazine. He recognised that his new greens are a real headache compared to his old ones at Muirfield. It can't be that we are all idiots. Even Augusta with its frightening budget and the colossal expertise at its disposal has greens that at the end of the day, to be quite frank can look a bit spiked up, especially when they are compared to some of our better links and heathland tracks.

McDivot, you whinging old git you may well like to say, but wait, I have one other point to make. One of greenkeeping's greatest mysteries must be the STRI's handbook on turfgrass seed. Why on earth do they assess grass cultivars for such things as summer and winter colour or freedom from dollar spot, which nobody gets or freedom from red thread, which is never a problem? Who cares if it's free of red thread? Freedom of being totally knackered after the first 50,000 hackers have dragged their spiked clodhoppers over them would be a bit more appropriate.

No, no, there are times when I

can sometimes believe the best sand based greens come when they have been massively overplayed from day one and the man in charge has then responded to his rapidly dying fescue and bent by applying fertiliser with a size nine shovel. The consequence of this is a rapid take over from our old friend poa annua. Then within a couple of years all you have is uniform poa that still manages to drain pretty well. At that point, fertiliser levels are reduced dramatically and the bent and fescue is reintroduced at its own rate to create something similar to those old established greens that can produce such excellent all round surfaces.

At Sludgecombe I have members, bless them, that have excitedly told me about a relatively new course with the most superb surfaces. "It's all fine grass," they say. So I have paid a visit only to find a uniform 100% perennial poa surface that I have to admit does look good even though I know it isn't right. Then who am I to argue?

Now before I get publicly flogged to death by Jim Arthur's pen, I would like to point out that at Sludgecombe I have attempted to keep them lean and hungry as the books tell us. But you should see my greens after a full days golf has been through them. Somewhere between ghastly and hideous would sum them up. I am hoping that one day they will settle down and have a vague resemblance to those superb links greens that are fed just once a year. Sometimes in the morning just after they have been cut, in certain lights and if you squint slightly and lower your line of sight so as you can't see the pitch marks and use your imagination, they can look quite good. But I fear I could be in for a long wait before I reach my goal.

So, if you are looking to take on a new, heavily played course with sand based greens then all I can say is, I hope you like a challenge.

There, I've got it off my chest, now you can call me a whinging old git.

**Sandy McDivot.**  
**Head Greenkeeper:**  
**Sludgecombe Pay and Play**

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 A7 at BTME

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