

Safe in the knowledge

Sandy McDivot takes a positive look at the current economic climate

This month I would like, if I may, to comment upon the long-term job security outlook for we keepers of fine turf. I believe this to be a timely exercise seeing as the world economy appears to be in nose-dive mode at the present time. So making the assumption that we have not made any serious tactical errors recently, such as head butting the Lady Captain, or engaging in something other than social intercourse with the Chairman of Green's wife what is the likelihood of us being voted off as the weakest link. I would say that there are only three potential reasons for such a predicament. The first is incompetence, the second, golf course change of use and the third, a general public shift away from golf to other activities.

The first of these is somewhat irrelevant and should be highly unlikely given that nearly all greenkeepers of dubious abilities have thankfully vanished to other industries, such as the health service or politics. Many moons ago I once worked for a Head Greenkeeper who knew nothing about turf or indeed any other subject and who would only sporadically turn up to work in order to hurl some foul mouthed abuse at we long suffering assistants before falling into a nearby bunker in a drunken stupor.

He was to greenkeeping what Prince Philip is to foreign relations, yet remarkably he remained in the same position for some six years before all the greens started to take on the characteristics of evil smelling brown porridge and the committee had to reluctantly dispense with his services. Even to this day, one hears comments from old members of that far off committee stating that this moron was the finest greenkeeper the club had ever known, but I disregard such declarations as sad hazy romantic yearnings for the past, combined with acute senile dementia.

So what of the second cause for job loss, that of golf course change of use. Well given the current profit margins available in agriculture, I think the chances of courses reverting back to farmland are somewhat unlikely. But as more and more courses are proprietary owned and the industry becomes proportionally more competitive, then courses could start to be developed into other potentially more lucrative schemes, such as housing construction or equestrian sports facilities. In fact I have recently heard of a course undergoing such change of use. This I understand was brought about by negative market forces, cash flow uncertainties, questionable location and the fact that the course in question was c**p. This I hasten to add, was no fault of the Course Manager but a result of chronic under funding together with employment of a course designer that looked like he had gained his qualifications at catering college.

An unfortunate case, but one that is by no means exceptional.

But what of the other potential threat to our livelihood. What are the chances of the game simply going out of fashion and thereby necessitating golf course closure on the grounds that no one would be seen dead playing the game? Preposterous you may think but wait, years ago the game of billiards was all the rage. Great halls housing dozens of tables were to be found in every town but who on earth plays the game now. More recently the sport of squash appears to be on a life support mechanism.

Even as we speak, sports centres across the land are knocking down the intervening squash court walls and filling the resultant void with trendy new exercise machines.

However, it is my humble opinion that on this front we have little to fear. The game of golf seems assured to grow in popularity for the foreseeable future and as a result we greenkeepers will be in ever-increasing demand with resultant theoretical wage increases to boot. The main threat to the growth of the game is expense but as skilled Course

Managers are able to maintain their courses to a high standard within tight budgetary controls, I see no problem here. Yes there are courses that cost ludicrous sums to maintain, but because they are in the minority and usually of championship standard, even they have a steady stream of affluent masochists ready to cough up the folding stuff in anticipation of five hours of ball searching torture. And if they don't, then the course simply reverts back to the more profitable pay and play option.

So how can I be so sure that more and more people will take up the game? Well with so many new courses on the scene, waiting lists have all but disappeared and anyone can obtain membership without having to spend several years in obsequious grovelling mode in an effort to get the dreaded interview. Then there is the fact that the game is starting to come to terms with its elitist image problems of the past. The social and dare I say it, ethnic barriers, have quite correctly departed from the game.

Tiger Woods may have complained of experiencing prejudice towards him in his formative years but that was far away. I remember recently listening to a radio interview of a young black professional golfer who had spent his junior golfing days playing at that well-known course near Reading, Calcot Park. The interviewer repeatedly brought up Tiger's past troubles in an effort to get the young golfer to dish the dirt on golf clubs in this country, but eventually this line of questioning was abruptly brought to a halt when the golfer stated that it may have happened to Tiger but he personally had never ever received anything other than total encouragement from the golfers of the Berkshire club, or indeed any other golfing venue.

Then there is the subject of role models that have taken to the game. What a huge benefit they have been. Certainly Tiger is one of the very best recruitment vehicles we could ever have asked for. Then there is Prince Andrew, he likes nothing better than

Iron and Greenke



to play a round. The fact is the sport is appealing to people from the most unlikely walks of life. Alice Cooper for instance, the boa constrictor loving 70's rock icon of domestic fowl oral decapitation notoriety, has so devoted his life to the game that he has managed to get down to 4 handicap. Smokey Robinson, former soul singer has created his own miracle by replacing his drug addiction with golf addiction.

Robbie Williams the womanising, beer drinking rock star rebel that the youth of the day so admire for his moral standards, plays to a 14 handicap. Likewise that other figurehead of high ethics and gentlemanly behaviour; Chris Evans. Then what about the England football squad. Rumour has it that half of them play golf to single figure handicaps and seeing as they thrashed Germany 5:1,

we have living proof that mastery in the art of golf, brings with it the total co-ordination so requisite in the lesser sport of football.

With even the communist republic of Cuba embarking on a golf course construction programme, we can assume that the great game has received full social acceptance throughout the world. But will the public keep playing once they have taken it up?

Well here we have another couple of tricks up our sleeve. For one thing golf is a game that can be played right up to the moment of death of mind and body. Indeed many of the members at the great links of Sludgecombe appear already to have progressed to at least stage one of this condition, if not both. The other weapon in our armoury is that for some reason the game is highly addic-

tive. I do not know the time explanation for this phenomenon but once people get going they simply cannot stop. I have a friend who has been playing once every two weeks for several years and has yet to score lower than 50 over par. He hates the game with a passion. It destroys him both physically and mentally every time he plays. Yet can he give it up? No he cannot.

Because hidden within the depths of shanks, duffs, twitches and air shots, there is always an effortless stroke that sends the ball soaring towards the target. It is this shot that transports him briefly to his own personal Nirvana and this shot that brings him back a fortnight later for further punishment. Desmond Morris would probably have put the brief exultation of this experience down to our hunter instinct that

years to see projectile sent to target, as it was when our very survival depended on a well executed launch of the spear towards quadruped. Sigmund Freud would probably have us believe it is all down to childhood sexual repression and back this peculiar theory up with references to our utilisation of equipment such as balls, shafts and holes etc.

Either way, of all sports, few can match golf in getting the participant to those levels of emotion that explore the boundaries of incontinence. I remember the birth of my son, Dexter, the heir to the McDivot estate (an Austin Montego estate to be precise). Complications set in and towards the end of the 12-hour ordeal there were four doctors and two midwives, each with worried looks on their faces, engaged in a tug of war exercise in an attempt to get the little blighter out. Now that was worrying, but I have to say the tension levels for me did not quite match that experienced when faced with a tricky down hill four foot left to righter for the 20 pence greener. Still I have to say, the elation of actually seeing the little lad pop out was at least equal to that of slotting a 12 footer, for a birdie on the last.

Of course I play little golf these days, due to Mrs McDivot's grave concern that it could lead to me experiencing temporary enjoyment, but I still fully understand the levels of emotion that the game can inflict on the innocent.

So there you have it. Conscientious, learned professionals that we are, we have little to fear as regards us swelling the Job Centre queues. Just study hard, engage in friendly banter with the members, blame the odd brown patch on a mutant nematode and never take a fortnight's holiday in June.

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