

Signs are here to stay and Sandy McDivot has made full use of an array of such notices at Sludgecombe Pay and Play.

Sign of the times



I suppose if I was to be brutally frank with myself and using management consultant's parlance, I would have to be classified as a resistor to change. But as I enter the realms of doddering senility, even I have to occasionally make way for the unstoppable momentum of change.

For example, it was not many years ago that I was totally convinced that computers had little place in the lives of we greenkeepers. Today however I have come to the conclusion that greenkeeping life without them would be all but impossible.

Another item that I have in the past had little regard for is the sign. I have always possessed the deeply held belief that being artificial they detract greatly from the aesthetic appeal of the golf courses that we so painstakingly help to create. I also believe that they have little actual value as a means of passing on information to the golfing public. For example, a venerable former Captain once suggested to me

that a carefully worded sign placed in a certain position would help ensure the prevention of the odd accident or two. He was apparently oblivious to the fact that just such a sign had been in the very place he mentioned for the previous 12 months.

You see the fact is, golfers notice only a very few things when playing golf. They see the golf ball, they form in their minds eye a straight line to that golf ball and if that line crosses a directive in the form of a white line, sign or rope that suggests they take a detour from that line, they fail to make visual contact with it. Often they notice such things as the noisy machine that a greenkeeper is working with on an adjacent fairway but rarely have any awareness of the nearby busy road or the jet aeroplanes overhead.

Often on a ladies' day I have been instructed that no greenkeeper will be allowed within a five-mile radius of the golf course, but to my knowledge they have not yet rang up our county's international airports to inform them that due to their Summer Invitational the days flights will have to be suspended.

So you see the purpose of the sign had always seemed to me to be somewhat superfluous. But I write in the past tense as like the computer I have now arrived at the conclusion that signs can play a very important role in the lives of we greenkeepers. The reason for my about turn, is the trend in more recent years towards litigation. The fear of prosecution and associated public humiliation has

meant the sign has become to me what the shoe is to Imelda Marcos.

My course has become flooded with them. If we are spraying, signs are put out that not only warn of the perils of the murderous chemicals that we are applying, but also advise that those that suspect themselves of being susceptible to the effects of these evil toxins should effectively go home and never return. I have learnt that there are many who have convinced themselves that within the spray tank we have concocted a cocktail of dioxin and botulin in a plutonium carrier and so I err on the side of caution.

I have not as yet felt the need to post those gory skin disease photographs that can be found within the pages of "The Lancet" as evidence of the consequences of straying within the two mile total exclusion zone that surrounds the sprayer, but who knows what the future will bring.

But other areas come in for the sign treatment. Slopes, adjacent fairways, blind shots, bridges, you name it, at Sludgecombe Pay and Play there's a warning sign for just about everything. In short, I have come to treat the sign as something of an insurance policy against legal action. The way I see it is, if McDonalds can be successfully prosecuted for a million dollars or so because their coffee was too hot, then I am sure we greenkeepers are vulnerable to similar legal pursuance.

Now I have to confess I have not lost too much sleep over Mr McDonalds' misfortune but when you hear cases of children suing their

parents because they are too ugly and should therefore of been aware of the likelihood of their offspring suffering the same fate, then I do get a little anxious.

Of course such obsessive pursuit of damages can have its uses. A financial advisor friend recently informed me that anyone requiring instant wealth should break his or her leg in an American airport. Apparently such accidents result in an immediate, no quibble, out of court settlement of about a million pounds sterling these days. This one seemed to get Mrs McDivot somewhat excited, although I was not altogether sure whom she thought would meet with this unfortunate accident.

But the mere act of putting a sign up does not necessarily mean immunity from prosecution. In fact I do not discount the probability of the day arriving when we are sued for the entire wealth of ourselves and the next 20 generations of our families, because a golf ball has rebounded off one such warning sign and caused permanent disfigurement to someone in the form of a slight bruise.

There are other ways our signage could result in a visit to court. For example there is the question of the call through hole. This is a great favourite among committee men and women and involves a sign requesting that people call the following group through when reaching a par three green. The theory behind this one is that they are in some way speeding up play. This may or may not be the case but what the sign is



really saying is when you get near to the green you are required to invite the next group of golfers to hit golf balls at you. Now I don't know about you but in my humble opinion that is just asking for trouble.

A golf course near to me has an array of signs just about everywhere. As you drive into the car park, the first one you see states visitors must only park in the rear car park. This immediately gives the impression that visitors are an unwelcome parasite that are not worthy of the car park adjacent to the clubhouse but instead have to hide their beaten up old bangers around the back so as not to offend the members. The next one you see tells you that mobile phones are not allowed in the car park, clubhouse, golf course or any of the vertical air-space above the same.

This requirement was confirmed to me when someone I was with, accidentally had his go off while in the pro shop. He was immediately pounced upon by irate members and thoroughly admonished for bringing these symbols of Lucifer into their temple. But the thing about this course, was that it was located in a retirement area and had a steep slope at its furthest reaches affectionately known as "Cardiac Hill" due to the number of elderly members who while climbing up it had finally succeeded in conquering their habit of living.

The membership was to put it mildly, getting on a bit. In fact the worry was, an especially harsh winter could wipe half of them out in one go. Now the Head Greenkeeper had personal-

ly witnessed nine of them exit this world, so what would happen at this club, if while at the far end of the course someone suffered a heart attack and required urgent medical attention. If due to the prohibition of mobiles that person dies while their partner risks his or her own life in running back to the clubhouse to fetch help, then what is the clubs legal position.

Surely they were aware of the potential threat to life that they could be posing by the implementation of this ban. Would they then be open to prosecution?

Of course signs on golf courses are not only used to warn of potential danger. They are also needed as a means of direction. I am sure I am not alone in witnessing golfers walking onto a tee adjacent to the preceding green and not quite being able to work out how according to the card, the hole they face should be a short par three when all they can see is a green

some five hundred yards distant.

To such golfers the concept of numerical order is often a difficult one to grasp and so they require signage to direct them to the correct part of the course. I remember the story of how two visiting Americans once played golf at Royal St George's only to stray mid round onto the neighbouring Princes Golf Club. Amazingly they finished the round, had lunch in the wrong clubhouse and only realised something was wrong when they could not find their car in the car park. Then there was the unfortunate case of the poorly directed newly appointed greenkeeper at Sunningdale Ladies' Golf Club who was asked to rake bunkers.

He would of benefited greatly from a direction sign as somehow after raking the bunkers on the Ladies course he managed to end up on the Old course at Sunningdale.

This is a course that apart from bordering the Ladies Club was otherwise

entirely unrelated. The poor apprentice then worked his way through the bunkers on the Old and then onto those of the New Course. It appeared the actual Sunningdale greenkeepers who witnessed this, did not inform the hapless apprentice of his errors.

They reasoned that he was doing such a fine job of raking their bunkers why would they want to stop him.

But no matter how many signs we put out, we can never cover ourselves for every eventuality. A quick glance through the pages of Golfers Handbook reveals that two women once died on the course when an aeroplane hit them. In another three separate cases, golfers have died when their golf shafts have broken mid swing, rebounded off inanimate objects and plunged into their bodies.

Now try doing a risk assessment on those!

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