



BIGGA
ESSAY
COMPETITION

David Roy, of Linlithgow GC, winner of the 2000 BIGGA Essay Competition for Head Greenkeepers/Course Managers, reveals his winning entry

Write stuff?

Managing without chemicals Is it possible and how would I cope?

When asked to consider whether it is possible to manage a golf course without chemicals, my thoughts immediately turned to European legislation and the impending likelihood, that at some stage in the future, there may be very few chemicals with which to combat turf problems. That this often talked about change in attitude has come about at all is due to a recent shift in the way in which European governments view the natural environment and how it is con-

trolled, which is perhaps how the title of this essay came into being.

Ever since the first alchemist attempted to use science to turn lead into gold, man has lived with the notion that nature can be distilled and separated into elements and that these can be used to twist and bend our environment to suit our needs.

Man has seldom, if ever, accepted that the human race should live within the bounds set by mother nature, but

recently there has been enough publicity about the European Community's attitude towards chemicals to suggest that this may be changing.

The golf industry is obviously bound to be affected by any change in pesticide regulations and I, in turn, will be affected, but how will I cope?

Read on...



BIGGA ESSAY COMPETITION

Managing without chemicals

Is it possible and how would I cope?

It must be accepted that a golf course can be cared for and excellent playing surfaces produced without the use of chemicals, but what is required to change for this to happen? I will readily admit to using any pesticides that I consider appropriate to solve a specific turf problem, but is this really necessary? The amount of resources placed at our disposal for the maintenance of a golf course are based on what is available in terms of the pesticides that can be used to save labour; but what if these are to be withdrawn? Are we producing better courses by utilising every available pesticide or are they simply different from those on which the game was first played?

There are probably only a handful of problems associated with the care of a golf course that can be solved most easily by the application of chemicals, but we have become used to the amount of time that this saves. There are very few Greenkeepers who would deny that all of the most common turf problems can be controlled without the use of chemicals and it is probable that the only thing that prevents this from being the case is the golf culture of today. It is the pressure brought to bear on Greenkeepers to save time that drives the use of chemicals to control the common problems associated with the production of fine turf.

I am sure that the skills and knowledge exist to manage turf problems culturally, but are golf clubs prepared to find the necessary extra resources to do this and to continue to present their courses in their current fashion. I am old enough to have experienced highly labour intensive practises on a golf course that are no longer necessary - but where has the time saved gone? Instead of spending weeks mixing, spreading and dragging twenty tons of top dressing by hand we routinely carry out this operation in one day giving us the rest of the week to cut as much grass as is humanly possible.

Without too much trouble, we can pinpoint what was different on the average golf course in Britain twenty years ago. Fairways were cut once per week with trailed gangs, large areas of rough were only cut once per year and bankings or verges rarely saw a scythe. But golf was quick to adopt each new technological advance in grass cutting techniques and fairways are regularly cut twice per week with ride-on mowers, acres of rough are now kept in check with an array of implements and trimmers have shorn unkempt corners in every course.

This attitude towards unquestioningly accepting "progress" has had a great influence on the way that chemicals are used to help create golf tracks that allow two hundred people to speed around in average round times of four hours. The thought of returning to the type of course that abounded fifty years ago with rank roughs, slow fairways and unkempt margins is abhorrent to most golfers used to the manicured motorway golf of the twenty-first century. Many golf clubs have grown to a point that their course has to be set up to accommodate over one thousand members playing golf twelve months of the year, and if the time is coming when chemicals are no longer to be used on fine turf and manual labour is to be used instead, will this type of course continue to be viable?

If the choice between using labour intensive cultural controls for weeds, pests and diseases and using chemical pesticides is taken away from us, what will change and who will find it more difficult to cope? I would like to argue that it would be the modern golfer, rather than the modern Greenkeeper who would find it more difficult to cope and the entire culture of golf management will be forced to make difficult decisions about the type of courses that can be produced without the use of chemicals. In order to explain this more clearly, it is neces-

sary. to look at what thinking shapes the way in which golf courses in this country are managed to see what rationale there is for not embracing change.

It is rare in both traditional members' clubs and modern proprietary facilities to see golf courses that either cling on to, or were designed with a course set up that is radically different from those facilities that are seen as normal, or desirable. But what influences the way that many golfers think that a golf course should look like? Presumably there must be some influence from television, but this cannot explain the contradiction we see when golfers marvel at the Old Course and its policy of minimal fertilising, yet pressurise their own club to produce a lush green course with all the contingent problems that this brings.

A golfer's view of how his or her own course should be set up must also be influenced when he or she plays at a club that employs a massive amount of resources to produce a specific type of course and it is perhaps this that has the greatest influence on current course set-ups. The golfer's entirely human desire to improve their own environment by matching the standards set by their recent experiences has led to direct comparisons between the very richest golf courses in Britain and the very poorest. The average golfer may not openly admit that they wish their own course to be as manicured as Augusta National or the impressive new multi-million pound course that they were privileged to play last year, but these are the standards that they have perhaps subconsciously set in their mind.

Many golfers are reluctant to accept that if their club or course can only afford to employ four Greenkeepers, then the standards of presentation and quality of playing surface must be different from a club or course that can afford to employ forty. This, as I have already said, may be a subcon-

scious reluctance, but it is at the root of most of the pressure that is brought to bear on a Course Manager of the average course in Britain. But, if a course is presented in such a way that allows the Greenstaff time to carry out many more labour intensive weed, pest and disease control and preventative measures will it be a poor course or simply different? I have a strong belief that if labour on a golf course is released from the shackles of endless grass cutting to concentrate on tasks such as top dressing, aeration and hand watering, the resultant change would not create poorer golf courses, but simply make them more challenging.

In the quest for length on old established courses in Britain, most of the blame has been laid at the door of golf club and ball manufacturers and all the improvements that they have made to golf equipment. Little consideration has been given to the ability of the modern bogey golfer to spray the ball with impunity and still find it. It is only due to the widening of fairways, semi-roughs, the cutting of bankings and so on that has resulted in the reduction of many courses to the label of "pitch and putt". Perhaps if the same courses were set up in the same manner they were forty years ago there would be far fewer eight degree loft, massively oversized drivers in the bags of players and more judicious use would be made of the far more forgiving three wood. Accuracy rather than distance would become the most desirable talent for a golfer.

Was the way in which Carnoustie was presented for the Open in 1999 unattractive or unfair? Was the resultant media frenzy deleterious for golf? Did golfers stay away in their droves? Carnoustie was given mixed reviews by every golfer that watched the Open that year, but nobody denied that the way in which it was presented was in any way artificial or that the best

golfers in the world were severely tested and that perhaps many more courses could be presented in this way.

If we were to reduce drastically the amount of rough cutting (and by this I mean all areas of rough grass) to maintain the most important playing surfaces without the use of chemicals, and that this policy was accepted readily by the golfers, then there would be no problem - golfers would be able to continue to pay the same fees for a round of golf. If, however, the golfers were reluctant to accept an increase in the amount of time spent looking for balls, that many more shots would be played from deep rough instead of semi-rough and that average round times would increase, then far more resources would have to be made available in order to achieve the course set up they desire and still have time to devote to tasks such as hand weeding, top dressing and so on.

There will undoubtedly be changes in golf course management over the next twenty years. The scientific industry that has produced complex chemical compounds has proved recently that it can produce equally effective methods for the control of these same problems without the use of chemicals. These naturally occurring preventative measures are used routinely in the form of seaweed solutions, carbohydrate feeds, microbacterial compounds and so on, but the science involved in producing these is still in its infancy and is still not holistically used.

If, or perhaps when, every tool is harnessed to both prevent and control turf problems and golf courses come to accept that changes in current practises are inevitable, then I have no doubt that I will cope with the removal of chemicals as a management aid and that Greenkeepers everywhere will prove once again that turf management is not simply a case of cutting grass.

Have you got the
Write
stuff?



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