

Education is the key

Ian Tomlinson's excellent article in the January issue of Greenkeeper International was a breath of fresh air for those of us who believe in traditional greenkeeping, and should be a warning for those who rely on the combination of fertilisers and chemicals. Working abroad where pesticides have been banned and fertiliser use is being closely monitored would surely change the approach of many greenkeepers, and I firmly believe no matter what our suppliers tell us it is only a matter of time before we will be in the same position.

Ian describes in detail the causes of his Poa dominated greens and their subsequent failure. Excessive use of fertiliser and water combined with a minimal aeration programme is a recipe for disaster and Poa domination as well as a soaring chemical bill. It is surely time for us all to embrace these traditional principles he talks about and take a more cultural and environmentally friendly approach to greenkeeping. These principles are by no means new and have been the ones that Jim Arthur has long advocated. One of the most important factors, if we are to embark on such a radical change in policy and management, is the support of our members. Education is the key! We need strong leadership to form a nationwide education programme to make members understand that the 'green' courses they see every week on satellite television are neither the way forward or possible on our limited budgets and that a radical review is needed. This education programme must be carefully designed to promote the qualities of traditional British golf courses both from a playing and environmental perspective.

More importantly, it must be drawn up and presented from either the Home Unions or the R&A as they invariably have more respect among members than our Association. So let Ian's article be a catalyst for us as an Association and an industry to take a long hard look at the way we manage our golf courses and to put pressure on those governing bodies to help us educate our members on why there is a need for change.

A. McCombie, Parkstone Golf Club

Northern Seminar thanks from Longhirst

Just a small note to say thank you to Doug Bell and Bert Cross for bringing the recent Northern Seminar to Longhirst Hall GC. The speakers were entertaining and very informative. A thank you must also go to the 25 or so greenkeepers who travelled on a particularly cold and frosty day. It just goes to show the club members that greenkeepers do actually think of educating themselves! Looking forward to hosting next year's autumn competition. Regards,

Graham Chambers, Course Manager, Longhirst Hall, Northumberland

A Golf Club Manager's view

Prior to becoming a Golf Club Manager I spent 20 years as an electronics engineer. When I became a manager in this environment I was aware of the skill sets of my key managers and employees. It was not my job to manage their areas rather to make sure that they did it right and that they had everything that they needed to do it.

When I came in to golf, the one area where I had no skills was greenkeeping so I filled this gap by attending courses run by BIGGA and STRI. The information gained has been supplemented by becoming an Associate Member of BIGGA and actually reading Greenkeeper International. I also spend time talking to my greenstaff and learning from them. I am now in a position that I can discuss and question matters intelligently with my Head Greenkeeper and communicate information in detail to the membership (which hopefully they pass on to other members!).

I have worked with Head Greenkeepers from both ends of the spectrum: A young man who was happy to formulate our greens management policy with me and then to discuss greenkeeping matters with the members and the other who was probably capable of doing this but accepted that he was going to be told what to do by the committee and therefore sat back and accepted it and made no decisions of his own.

I expect my Head Greenkeeper to

come to me and tell me what we should be doing, be prepared to discuss the line he is taking and why he has eliminated other options, then get on with it and that is why he is being paid the salary commensurate with the job.

More and more golf clubs are changing their management structures to have small management committees. Because golf clubs have become businesses, the amount of legislation has escalated dramatically and is specific to the environment plus there are less and less volunteers for positions on the committees because of the pressures on time of modern life. These changes mean that the staff these clubs employ have an increasing self determination of their role as they become solely responsible, through higher management, for their department. 'Course Development' documents are rapidly becoming the norm as a way of eliminating the changeable nature of the Green Committee. These allow the greenkeeper to advise on the best management policy for the course and get it down in print. He can then be left to perform the job he is paid to do, with the committee/s only being involved with exceptions to the plan.

In some clubs these changes will happen slowly so the long standing Head Greenkeeper will have a chance to adapt if that is what is expected of him.

But in other clubs this will happen overnight and Head Greenkeepers should be preparing themselves for the change now! For existing Head

Greenkeepers, the majority of the change will have to be by self help, but for the staff being trained now, there should be an emphasis on applicable management techniques so that, as they become Deputy Heads and upwards, they are confident enough to be able to discuss the management of the links with senior management and not be afraid to stand their ground, backed by fact, if they feel they are correct. At the end of the day, if a company wants to go against specialist advice there is little you can do to stop them, but it is probably time to look for a new job!

The final thing that we have to remember is that WE have chosen a profession where the shareholders in the company are also the customers and can have direct daily access to the workforce which is not something that you will find in Lloyds Bank or ICI! Therefore, we have to deal with the situations that that environment brings accordingly.

Ian Tomlinson should be aware that the Secretary/General Manager is responsible for the running of the whole company and not just one part of it, therefore he should question what one of his heads of department is doing, but I wouldn't expect him to overrule that manager unless he has good reason.

As a small aside for Dave Goodridge, my 20 years engineering were spent in the RAF.

Richard Penley-Martin, Secretary, Stoneham Golf Club

Working together for mutual benefit

I have been reading your recent correspondents' remarks with great interest and thought that I could provide some different angles.

While I agree that Course Managers must lead with authority, they will always be limited by the level of authority invested in them by their employer and can only act as they wish if appropriately empowered. It is an unfortunate fact that Greens Committees do not always have the best interests of the golf course in mind when they make important decisions.

I know of several instances where the use of temporary greens is diminishing because Captains, committees etc, are overriding Greenkeepers' decisions in order to fulfil the day's intention of playing golf. I also know of two local courses where temporary greens are not employed at all, much to the Course Manager's vexation.

Previous letters on this subject have commented on "interference from Greens Committees" so this is clearly a common problem. (For "interference" should we be reading "ill-advised decisions"?). However, the Committee is in place to serve the best wishes of the mem-

bers; and the Course Manager is employed with the same end. Regrettably for many members (including those in authority) the distinction between the short and long term health of the golf course is a difficult one to realise. Bearing these factors in mind, surely Course Managers and Club officials should be working together for the mutual benefit of both the golf course and the members? It is not unreasonable to expect partnerships of this nature to operate successfully; indeed they already do in some enlightened golf clubs. Harold Blackshaw may well stand aside to let his electrician rewire his house, but I dare say he might indicate where he wants his power points.

In my view, there is an immense task ahead: We need to educate all those people in golf clubs whose business is with the golf course itself. Due to the ephemeral nature of committees, it would surely be sensible to target all golf club members i.e. future committee members. Whether BIGGA, for all its efforts, is large enough or influential enough to tackle such a task, is a tricky question. Maybe we need to enlist the help of other golfing authorities: could the R&A

commission The Way Forward for established golf clubs: could the EGU and the LGU help us to emphasise the importance of the golf course to their members?

It is evident in Central Government that power is cyclical and perhaps the rise in the greenkeeping profession that we have witnessed over the last decades is levelling off and the golf clubs are trying to reassert authority; trying to re-establish the power they have ceded. Only when those in authority are educated, and only when golf club members realise that the whole greenkeeping ideal is asseverated for the benefit of their golf game, will Course Managers be granted the necessary freedom to conduct their business to the fullest extent of their knowledge and ability.

I must thank the Editor of this magazine for respecting my wishes for anonymity. I have no reason to hide my opinions from greenkeepers, but as I am not a Course Manager, I feel this letter may be considered inflammatory at my golf club, and I do not wish to compromise my colleagues or myself.

Name and Address supplied

A stress reducing equation

It's a simple law of economics taught to every GCSE student in the country. What's all this about I here you ask!

Well over the last few months there have been several letters and articles written about the poor state of the greenkeeping profession. It seems to me that, apparently, this poor state is due to interfering committees and lack of respect from the golfing public.

All the letters go on about wanting to produce wonderful courses and how committees change too often and don't have the right credentials for the work they put themselves up for and several more comments of the same nature.

I believe it is the attitude of these greenkeepers that brings problems on themselves and not the fault of the whole industry. As Duncan McGilvary pointed out in his article in the November issue of Greenkeeper international 90% of golf in Britain is played on private members golf courses. The very nature of these clubs is a committee structure, and golf clubs have been run like these for over 100 years. Part of being a Greenkeeper is working with committees and Chairmen of the Greens Committee. All greenkeepers should realise this is part of the job just the same as top-dressing or applying fertiliser. Once this has been accepted a more harmonious relationship can be formed.

The committee structure is used widely in life, often known by another name, the government is a large structure of committees and sub committees, BIGGA is run by a committee structure, as are many golf clubs. The committees are the voice of the people, trying to run to the best of their ability whatever club, association or even country they are in charge of. As you will all know, committees never please all of the people all of the time

as different people have different ideas and views on everything in life. Golf club committees try to provide what they feel the members want from their course and they have to pass on or communicate these wants on to us the greenkeepers.

Is this the interference we hear so much about? I don't consider committee views, activities or even orders as interference. It is part of the communication process, which is set up within committee run golf clubs. This is where I get back to supply and demand. We, as greenkeepers, are the suppliers of a product (the golf course) and as suppliers we should produce the product that is demanded by the golf club members.

If they want slow, bumpy greens that they can stop the ball on with a driver, never wanting them aerated because of those blasted holes that makes them miss so many puts, if they want fairways cut so short the grass dies at the first sign of the illusive British sun, if they want rough so short they can rip a 3-wood 120 yards and never lose the golf ball they bought in 1985 who are we to argue.

We are not all producing top class championship courses for Tiger Woods and Co with long thick rough, narrow fairways and greens so fast the average club golfer would wet themselves! In this day and age where competition is tough for new members at golf clubs it is the role of the greenkeepers to provide what the golfers want and ensure the future success of your employer. Supplying the desired product is where we use all the skills, knowledge and experience that we have, even if it is not what we consider to be a good course or aesthetically pleasing. The finished product should be made to the highest standard within the parameters

set out by the clubs committees.

We cannot change the establishment and golf club structure so we need to be more adaptable to our surroundings and the clubs needs and the golfers ever changing desires. Other members of the clubs management team e.g. the pro and secretary should be used by us to get information to and from the members. These people should be classed as colleagues, not the enemy as some believe them to be. A pro or secretary with a little knowledge of greenkeeping can be a very handy partner on occasions such as hollow tining or course closure in the winter. These people are more on the front line of customer relations if they understand why, they can pass on the reasons to the golfers. Golf pros don't want to be greenkeepers any more than we want to sit in a shop selling sweets and tee pegs all day, so we should not feel threatened if we are, as I'm sure we all are, competent at our jobs.

Most golfers know what they want from a golf course and they don't want to know how to achieve it. That's our job to educate and enlighten them as to the needs of the grass plants they can see and the soils they can't. There are many ways to educate golfers. Open evenings, greens forums, a chat with Joe Smith on the 12 fairway. Use your imagination. The one thing we are all guilty of is poor or non existent communication. So come on greenkeepers, stop moaning about what a bad lot we have, and use all your skills to make the golfers happy. Remember ...

**Happy Golfers = Less Moans
= Happy Greenkeepers**

Leslie Howkins, Happy Head Greenkeeper,
Cleethorpes Golf Club, N.E.Lincs

Help with lawn sand?

Has anybody experienced problems with turf damage to their greens following an application of lawn sand? We have unfortunately used lawn sand, as usual, only for it later to be found to be contaminated with herbicides and over a period of 1-8 weeks thereafter suffered severe decline and ultimately death of significant areas on our greens. We were able to prove that the lawn sand was the cause due to the fact that the **one** green that was not treated was the **only one** that remained undamaged. More importantly we had left over sealed unused bags which we have had tested at two independent laboratories for herbicide contaminants. If we had not had any left over, nor had the one green untreated, we are unlikely to have been able to establish the cause, and certainly been unable to prove it.

Should you have cause to now suspect that a routine application of lawn sand may have led to damage on your greens, contact the magazine with details of your supplier and manufacturer and the batch number printed on the bag. Should it be the same as that used by ourselves it may be of great help to you.

Please respond through the pages of this magazine

Enviro thanks

Thank you for the excellent coverage (again) of this year's 2001 environmental competition and again we see the total commitment from numerous courses throughout the UK in promoting and enhancing environmental aspects. I would just like to point out a discrepancy in the article concerning my course, Bradley Park Golf Club. We have 300 members and not 200, plus the pay and play customers with being municipal. The number of rounds per annum is between 55,000 and 60,000. Thank you again and here's to the future promotion of environmental concern on our courses.

D. W. Brierley, Head Greenkeeper,
Bradley Park Golf Club

In defence of National Vocational Qualifications

I recently read with dismay a letter in the Greenkeeper International from John Ross. His views are that the NVQ system was failing and yet another qualification should be produced to test our greenkeepers. Having worked my way through the City & Guild to stage four, NVQ level four and beyond that, I believe that there is and always will be room for improvement and this should come in part from the Head Greenkeepers and not just the governing bodies.

The GTC have established working groups that already review the training. The groups have representatives from colleges, STRI and BIGGA. It is through this partnership that the employers and greenkeepers now have an excellent range of qualifications to choose from that they feel most appropriate to the trainee and the club.

As I understand it, the NVQ system is all about making sure the person being trained can actually do the job on the ground as well as holding their own in a committee room when necessary.

I have living proof at the course where I am that NVQ's do work. I have only been here for 16 months and already have

one of my staff well on the way to completing NVQ level two. This is a 37 year old man who had no ambition in the trade, he just used to come to work do the job and then go home. He now knows botanical names for trees, grass and plants and can identify them as well. He now uses many other skills that he had but was not encouraged to employ.

For the critics that say it's all so easy, what would you expect if a person has been doing the job for 11 years. He should know how to operate the machinery used to maintain the course. There are parts of the NVQ that need hard work and lots of it. What the NVQ system does is give them a chance to go forward, learn more and gain a recognised qualification on the way.

The other very important factor is that the Head Greenkeeper must put himself on the line and encourage the staff to ask questions. When a staff member goes through the NVQ system it will act as a refresher for all the staff (including the Head Greenkeeper). Questions that are asked in the tea room can be thrown open to everyone. It is up to the Head Greenkeeper not to be frightened that he

may not know the answer. There have been occasions when I have either forgotten the answer or have not known it. Nobody knows everything and we are all trying to improve are own lot in one way or another so let's share the real knowledge with each other that we get from our experience. I am not knocking the old system, but it is the real hands on knowledge that needs to be handed down along with the technical information from the text books and college.

As for the fact that John Ross seemed to find the NVQ 3 easy, as I have already stated a person doing the job should be able to do this. Level three is a stepping stone to level four and lack of theory, if any, should be dealt with at the appropriate levels. The governing bodies have put into place many other qualifications and perhaps he should have a go at one of them. At least then if any of his staff need his help he will be able to offer it.

Some of the other points about the need for support for the lonely greenkeepers is in my opinion justified. However I believe that too much information is being given back to the club members on how the course is maintained. Greenkeepers all

over the UK are measuring rain water and thatch levels etc. writing reports and putting them selves under unnecessary pressure. It is time to get back to work, if they don't ask, then don't tell them. No where else is it more true that a little information in the wrong hands can be most dangerous. A quick example is if you go for an operation the surgeon will tell you in the simplest way what he is going to do, he will not mention how many yards of cotton he will use or how sharp the blade will be, because you do not need or want to know.

Use the report writing time to work on the course or to help your staff and remember stop talking before you run out of things to say. Let the quality of your course do the talking for you. My final message is to those Greenkeepers who have no yet received the training to become a work-based trainer or even carried out an appraisal on their staff to identify training needs and in turn motivate that member of staff like my 37 year old! Get involved now, if you need help, it is out there for you, just ask.

T A Smith LCGI,
North Shore Golf Club, Skegness