



A PUBLIC disgrace

In a special US Open report, Sandy McDivot reveals a cunning plan to make the Championship more exciting

I write this while watching Mr Wood's engaged in his usual demolition of both course and fellow competitor at the US Open and I am being regaled with a steady stream of dialogue about how the venue is a public course – the Bethpage State Park Black Course.

Yes, hard to believe, but the US Open is being played on a "muni". Now as you know I am not one for cynical expression, but if that's a municipal then Tiger Woods is my illegitimate son. For starters they say it is subjected to 35,000 rounds of

fee, will be subjected to a huge hike. Then there is the huge problem that faces the game in that young Tiger is turning golf into a dull and predictable exhibition. So how can both problems be overcome?

Well, seeing as you ask, I would now like to reveal to you all, how I would promote golf as a game for the masses, while at the same time insure against future domination by the young genius.

Firstly I would select a true municipal course, one that is subjected to the annual onslaught of at least 70,000 rounds of golf, and only by qualified hackers, all of whom would be carefully vetted for complete golfing incompetence and ignorance of all matters pertaining to golfing etiquette.

Now I would like to examine the question of Tiger's prodigious length off the tee. How can we negate that as an advantage? Well, in the past they appear to have come up with the brilliant stratagem of extending the length of the courses in the hope that it will result in even Tiger being unable to reach holes in a couple of smacks. Well far be it from me to point out the bleeding obvious, but is that not being plain stupid?

What we must do is select a course that is no more than 6,000 yards from the back tees. And, as the back tees on a municipal are for ornamental purposes only, it would mean a course of no more than 5,500 yards, which should take away all his length advantage.

Secondly, how can we combat his physical advantage? Well I have thought long and hard about this one and I think I have come up with the answer.

Remember that this tournament, will be played strictly to true municipal tradition, so Tiger must turn up at the club on the Saturday and Sunday morning at about 4am, ready

to put his ball in the chute in anticipation of the twilight kick off.

So what about Tiger's famous preparations? Well, we must insist that only genuine council range balls are used. These have a random built in bias that will turn a hook into a slice and a slice into a hook, thereby insuring total confusion.

The Head Greenkeeper will have a critical role to play. It is essential that Tiger's ability to impart backspin is removed so all the fairways should remain uncut for at least a month before the big event.

The Head Man must also take full responsibility for creating as much of a luck factor as is realistically feasible. He can do this by insuring that the fairways are composed of at least 50% unreplaced divots, that the bunkers are officially classified as a disgrace and that the greens are riddled with pitchmarks. They must never exceed 3 on the stimpmeter and the holes will be changed two months prior to the big event and not again until the day after it finishes.

Now let us study how we may remove Tiger's exceptional powers of concentration. I think we should partner Tiger with Old Sid, who has played off a 24 handicap for the last 30 years, but has not actually played to it since 1975. He has never ever lost a golf ball, not because he is exceptionally accurate, far from it, it is just that he carries on looking for all lost balls until they are found, regardless of the time factor and he will expect Tiger to help him.

Bring all that into force and I reckon Tiger would be reduced to second favourite behind John Daly, who would be quite at home at such a place. And if after all that, he still manages to win, they should not only give him the trophy to keep.

Sandy McDivot, Head Greenkeeper, Sludgecombe Pay & Play

You can just imagine the success rate of a Head Greenkeeper going to the local council and asking for three million so as he can tart things up a bit for a big tournament. Seeing as a request for a new rake normally brings a requisite filling in of a 20 page form in triplicate, I think his chances are somewhat limited

golf annually, which on a true public golf course would be officially defined as empty. Then we are told that they have spent three million on getting the thing up to standard. You can just imagine the success rate of a Head Greenkeeper going to the local council and asking for three million so as he can tart things up a bit for a big tournament. Well seeing as a request for a new rake normally brings with it the requisite filling in of a 20 page form in triplicate, then I think his chances are somewhat limited.

But the more I think of it the more I believe the USGA has missed a golden opportunity. Presumably their rationale for visiting a public course, was to make the statement that the game of golf is open to all. But this was not your normal "muni" as at the end of this year's US Open, the green



Sandy McDivot gives you an insight into the McDivot turf maintenance philosophy

ENOUGH IS enough

I seem to recollect a couple of years ago receiving a call from Old Archibald, my counterpart at Sleepwell on the Weald GC, the club that time forgot. "Sandy" he said with more than a hint of desperation in his voice, "I've got some horrible disease all over my greens, it's all green and furry, you must come over and help me". "Do not panic Archie," I said, "I'm on my way". As I drove over, it did occur to me that the unseasonably wet and mild weather could have been the catalyst to all sorts of mysterious new pathogens, many of which poor Archie would not be overly familiar with. But as I had over the years got to know his greens almost as well as my own, I felt confident that I could come up with something approaching the correct diagnosis.

I met him on his 18th green as he was bent over looking at this horrible affliction. "What on earth is it?" he asked me, with the look of a man

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in the final throws of a nervous breakdown. I too peered at his turf and did indeed notice something that I had never seen on his immaculate surfaces before. "Archie" I said, "what you have, is grass!"

Now, you have probably deduced from the above, that Old Archibald's approach to turf management leans towards the traditional. You may also conclude that he is a species of green-keeping dinosaur that cannot attain the status of extinction rapidly enough.

Well yes in certain respects you are probably correct. After all, ask him what a risk assessment is and he would probably describe it as an extremely useful decision making tool to be utilised when faced with the dilemma of staying for another pint, weighed up against the possible long term physical damage inflicted to his ear drums during the wife's welcome home speech.

But despite this, I wonder how many of you have ever actually appreciated the true delights of Old Archibald's traditional bent/fescue dominated sward. Have you ever played on a green with the texture of tarmac, the look of rusty brillo and the wear resistance of kevlar? Have you ever experienced the sheer exhilaration of observing one of your members delicately tap a putt only to see it actually accelerate past the hole and into an adjacent pond?

Anyway, to get back to his greens, after some discussion, both Archie and myself decided that this severe outbreak of extraneous leaf material was the result of the aforementioned weather conditions together with a misguided application of organic nitrogenous fertiliser he put down in 1985. "I won't be doing that again in a hurry" he said, before explaining that it was the result of some especially fiendish sales techniques deployed by an unscrupulously attractive female rep.

He then went on to elucidate on how this unfortunate moment of weakness was in direct conflict with his usual feeding programme which consisted of walking around the course on a windy day while waving a piece of partially decomposed seaweed in the air.

But before we dismiss poor Archie and his turf management techniques to the annals of antiquity, should we not examine the potential benefits that could be accrued with the utilisation of his type of feeding regime.

For starters, can you imagine the situation of never having to go home on an October Friday afternoon with the fear that if the mood takes it,

microdochium navale will come in over the weekend and remove both your greens and your career in one fell swoop? Can you also imagine the scenario of learning that your irrigation system has in the middle of July experienced a catastrophic failure without the slightest worry for the long or short-term health of your greens?

Do you in reality fear that without a miraculous repair to the system, your greens would reach their expiry date the following afternoon?

Had you placed a figure of £1000 in the budget column marked fungicide with the absolute certainty that this will give you a grand to spend on more important commodities such as top dressing? Are you able, on a day when the grass is covered in a heavy white frost, to allow play on all of your greens without the least fear that leaf damage will occur.

Have you regular need for such expensive and time-consuming operations as verticutting, scarifying, rolling, hollow tining, overseeding or even switching. Well if you have, perhaps you should consider the option of using a modified version of Old Archibald's methods.

But apart from some of the more obvious benefits, there are the other less obvious advantages to this system. For example, you do not have to concern yourself with the disposal of grass clippings; there won't be any. Then fear not the appalling look of a poorly adjusted mower on your greens. When you aren't cutting any grass, mowing faults are all but invisible. And remember, Archibald's approach is the "green" approach.

Of course it is not all sunshine and roses. Take this type of nutritional policy on board and you will end up with the following problems.

1. For starters the general greens texture can take on an alarming degree of firmness. This does then necessitate the need for your golfers to learn the art of the pitch and run shot on occasion. It also brings with it the requirement that they think

before they aimlessly muller their drives in the rough vicinity of the fairway. Failure to do so could result in them leaving a bunker betwixt ball and green, which on Archibald's surfaces would mean they are all but stuffed.

2. Then there is the problem that the normally innocuous disease known as fairy ring will blend into your greens about as well as Osama Bin Laden at a George Bush tea party.

3. Pitch marks that have not been repaired or improperly repaired can take anything up to a year to fully recover, thereby necessitating the use of fortnightly top dressings.

4. Then there is moss and sometimes clover, which in the absence of competition from grasses can run riot if you let it.

5. It only takes a couple of incontinent ducks to walk over your greens and you end up with unsightly green patches all over them.

6. No dew to help guide you when mowing? Then you had better use greenkeepers intuition, as that's the only way you're going to see your last line.

7. Also, you had better review your verticutting policy. Carry on doing that once a week and by June you'd have nothing left.

By and large though, in my own opinion, these are problems of mere nuisance value when compared to all the benefits one can enjoy. I should of course point out that I am not for one minute suggesting that we all regress to the days of Old Tom Morris. It is just that the traditional approach allied to more modern day techniques should be considered as a potential option and by traditional I do not mean just stepping up the aeration programme and easing back on the phosphate a bit.

Not long ago I took the Sludgecombe team on a pilgrimage to an old links course that I remembered had managed to maintain greens the way I like them. To me they were ideal. Somewhat sparse with the odd bit of clover in them perhaps, decidedly off colour certainly, but always incredibly firm, lightening fast and as true to putt on as any in the world. Yet when we played them, they were not as I had remembered. They were still good but somehow the poa annua had become dominant and they were a bit softer than I recalled and they were greener and the grass appeared to be not so fine.

They simply were not the same. So I contacted the greenkeeper in question, who had only been there for a few years and asked of his management policies. The answer when it came was as I had feared. They were hollow tining a couple of times a year

and they fed them around 120 Kg of nitrogen and they did this and that to them and somehow they had lost what they had. I am not saying he had done things incorrectly because at the end of the day I don't know what his circumstances were. Maybe he had been directed by his committee to change the character of the greens, but they were just not as I remembered and I think that that is a great pity.

So if I have by some miracle persuaded you that there could be something in old Archibald's turf management philosophies, how best can they be put into practice?

Well I believe it all comes down to getting your head around the fundamental principle that the least thing one wants is for the grass to actually grow. A tough one that I know but let me try to convince you. To help, let me list the common pitfalls associated with excessive applications of nitrogen and therefore grass growth. They are according to Dr Beard, poor surface quality, thatch accumulation, poor root growth, reduced tolerance to environmental stresses, decreased wear tolerance, higher evapotranspiration rates and greater susceptibility to disease.

In short if you over do it, your greens will be knackered. One then has to ask the question, why do we lob on loads of fertiliser to create all this grass and then spend the rest of the time trying to groom, brush, verticut, hollow core and scarify it all away again. It just doesn't make sense. You could argue that all these operations are carried out so as to avoid the pitfalls, but why not just stop applying nitrogen. That way you will automatically avoid thatch build up, achieve good root growth, create higher tolerance to environmental stresses, improve the wear resistance, have less need for irrigation and have little disease to worry about.

So what do I perceive to be the correct annual levels of applied nitrogen. Well I would say about 20 to 30 Kg per hectare, or to put it another way about 10% of what the fertiliser companies

recommend. In my humble opinion, that should be more than sufficient on most established greens. If you are getting too much moss and turf thinning, add a bit more, while if you are not getting any, cut the nitrogen down. Now I know what you are all saying and the word begins with "B" and I don't mean balderdash, but it has been done many times before and on all types of greens. Of course I do recognise that I am in no way aware of your own political situation with your members, but it does disappoint me when people simply dismiss the true traditional greenkeeping alternative as not being an option. I am telling you, it can work if the communication channels are in place and it is done properly.

To finish my argument, let me relay an account of a conversation I had with a fellow greenkeeper many moons ago who had two courses to look after. One of them, for one reason or another, was subject to prohibitive laws and regulations that meant he could do nothing

ing to these greens without a visit to the planning department and a lengthy and degrading bout of gaveling. The other course was basically a bog standard parkland layout owned and run by the members. He explained that his greens on the first course were in excellent condition and a pleasure to putt on and that they basically looked after themselves. However, his greens on the parkland course were showing all sorts of problems to the point where he had to constantly hollow core, overseed, topdress, scarify, vertidrain and most importantly of all, feed them on a regular basis. On the first course he had a bent fescue sward while on the other, despite all his work he had a predominance of poa annua and a heap of problems.

I leave the conclusions to yourselves.

Sandy McDivot, Head Greenkeeper, Sludgecombe Pay and Play.

