

# In the firing line



'In the firing line' first appeared in the October issue of 'Golf Club Management' magazine. Neil Thomas reports...

The game of golf has many facets and employs many professionals, not withstanding the professionals to be found within the ranks of the Tour or the PGA. Not least among them, and arguably the most important, is the course manager or head greenkeeper. He or she provides the playing surface upon which the golfer, be it club member or professional, plays to the best of his or her ability.

As such he has to be highly skilled and in this day and age a well-educated individual, environmentally aware, able to interpret and implement current legislation as well as meet the most exacting demands from club members whose expectations are fuelled by TV golf, often portrayed as the 'Augusta Syndrome'.

Yet it is a proven fact that these key individuals generally enjoy very little employment security and are often sacked on the whim of a club captain or chairman of green. Not all greenkeepers are blameless and cases must be examined on merit, but there is undoubtedly an alarming trend within many golf clubs to react to situations which are not of the greenkeeper's making and often of a temporary nature. Golf clubs often demand ideal playing conditions with little regard to the resources necessary or indeed to our intemperate climate. A bad round of golf by a club official can often lead to unwarranted recriminations in the light of the alleged condition of the course.

It never ceases to amaze that professionals from all walks of life take up positions on golf club committees and then proceed to run wild when confronted with problems on the golf course. They then take decisions clearly contrary to working practices within their own professions. The perceived culprit is the course manager or head greenkeeper and, irrespective of employment law, dismissal can quickly follow. Surprise, surprise, the individual takes legal advice and golf clubs often face meeting large compensation sums.

Derek Green, a former course manager at a club in Aberdeenshire, was made redundant by a chairman of green who announced on his arrival that he would dictate policy while Derek would manage the team. "He even told me that he saw no need for qualified greenkeepers to be working on the course," said Derek.

Derek was initially asked to take a 17.5 per cent pay cut, then five months after the arrival of the new chairman of green, he was made redundant.

He took the club to an industrial tribunal and as it was demonstrated that there had been no attempt to restructure other areas of the golf club and that Derek's redundancy had not resulted in a reduction of the wage bill, he was awarded £18,000 in compensation.

"When I was there the three man greenkeeping team had a combined 37 years of experience. This was replaced by a team with seven years of experience, but for the same overall wage bill," revealed Derek.

"I'd like to see the role of the chairman of green properly defined by the governing bodies of the game. The ideal is someone who works well with the greenkeeping team and acts as a link between them and the club membership, but you can also get some who just try to take over. That can't be right."

Derek's tale is not unusual. In recent months greenkeepers have been awarded sums of £19,000, £15,000 and £13,000 all of which have to be funded by the golf club member in one way or another. For example, one golf club member was surprised to discover 50 new lady members being welcomed into the club just a short time after a substantial compensation pay out had been made to one greenkeeper.

"Despite a greater awareness of employment rights and the obligations of employers, we are still seeing an increasing number of disputes being referred to our legal advisors and ultimately to employment tribunals. Clearly, there is a very large number of golf clubs who fail to either act in accordance with good employment practice or are simply unaware of it. Either way the cost implications to these organisations can be huge," said Debbie Emmerson, of General Legal Protection.

In the final analysis it is a no-win situation. The golf club normally loses a skilled head worker who in turn is out of a job and may be lost to the profession, while the club – and at members' clubs the vast majority of regular members have been no part of the decision to remove the greenkeeper – is likely to be faced with not inconsequential costs including recruiting a successor.

Many golf club members, including those on committees, simply do not understand or appreciate the world of the greenkeeper, who ultimately is the custodian of the club's most important asset, its golf course.

Today, greenkeeping is a skilled occupation, often stressful and demanding high standards of technical expertise. It is incumbent on a golf club to provide resources for its course commensurate with its expectations of playing standards. It is also essential that green committees work with and heed advice given by its expert on the golf course, rather than listen to committee members whose knowledge is invariably limited and whose time in office likely short-lived. It is in a club's best interests to ensure a harmonious working relationship between its green committee and its greenkeeping staff.

Standards demanded today and the resulting pressures will soon identify the inadequate manager and the club can act accordingly in line with employment legislation. The vast majority of course managers and head greenkeepers are hard-working, conscientious, trained and skilled individuals devoted to their profession and seeking career fulfilment. As such they deserve much better than dismissal on inadequate grounds and without cognisance of employment law.

The British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association (BIGGA) provides the opportunity for club officials to improve their understanding of some of the intricacies of greenkeeping while enabling them to give more informed consideration to the allocation of proper resources to the golf course. There has to be a better way forward and BIGGA is intent on working with its members and their employers to promote understanding and a joint approach to meeting golfers' demands for increasingly high standards of golf course preparation and maintenance.