

## The One Over-riding Parameter

I was thinking recently that the content on your letters page was getting a bit thin on the ground; but when I saw Jim Arthur's controversial (as usual!) letter get printed in December I knew the tide would soon turn!

It is always difficult to disagree with the principles behind what Jim has to say, and I have to say in his defence that the condition of my course has improved 100% since I read Practical Greenkeeping again and implemented most of Jim's back to basics ideas. I owe him a great deal of the praise I am currently getting for the condition of my greens.

However, it would be very easy for me to sit in my ivory tower, lord of a piece of ground tailor-made to make best use of his principles (perfect sandy rootzone, wall to wall fescues and bents - any encroachment of poa here is MY mistake -, and only around 12000 rounds a year), and criticise others less fortunate than myself. While I think Jim and all the people who responded to him make perfectly valid points, I think there is one over-riding parameter by which we, as greenkeepers, can all judge our successes in our "individual" situations, which surely ends this long running feud once and for all.

"Do you, as a greenkeeper, maintain your course in the way it was originally intended by the architect to be maintained, and are you sympathetic to how much impact the way you look after your course has on the way your course plays? If the architect who designed your course, be it 110 years ago (as in my situation) or two years ago (as in Neil Ballingall's situation), returned to play it tomorrow, would he be pleased, or would he be disgusted?"

The reason I believe this point to be the crux of the argument is because, as Paul Copsey quite rightly points out, golf has become horses for courses. Not everyone enjoys playing on threadbare links courses, while many (myself included) are not big fans of parkland golf. I don't think this matters, but what does annoy me intensely is when a fine design is ruined by an unsympathetic greenkeeper who has no idea about the intricacies surrounding the design. My course is most fun when it plays as it was intended to play, ie. hard and bouncy - and it would therefore be the cardinal sin for me to turn my greens to poa sponges. The challenge and subtleties would disappear, as they have on so many links. This is what has annoyed Jim Arthur all along.

But I don't know how Neil Ballingall or anyone else in his position can be criticised for maintaining their courses in the way they were designed either. After all, Bruce Devlin and Sam Torrance would have been fully well aware that the fairways and tees were going to be sown with ryegrass before they finalised their designs, and would have designed the subtleties around the grass. Neil should certainly be receiving nothing but praise for the condition of his very new greens, either. I haven't played the courses yet, but I did walk the Devlin and the surfaces looked tremendous.

Right, that was going to be my rant over, but seeing as it was you who opened the can of worms about the road hole bunker, and seeing the subject ties in perfectly with the rest of my argument, I'm going to throw my hat in the ring before I sign off! I haven't seen the modification yet, but I always thought the bump that was obviously created by thousands of golfers splashing sand onto the green in a vain attempt to extricate themselves from this hell-hole made that side of the green a bit of an unusable mockery. If, as I suspect has been the case, the committee who decided on this change (be that Eddie, Gordon or whoever) have gone back and studied old pictures of what that area of the green looked like originally, and have simply recreated this, then I applaud that wholeheartedly. Once again, a bit of sympathy has been shown for the ORIGINAL design, not the one that only exists for as far back as the memory of the people who are whinging about it.

Simon Freeman, Machrie GC, Isle of Islay

## St Andrews Bay

It has been my experience while working at Elmwood that Mr Jim Arthur's articles and textbooks are constantly referred to as the standard by which new ideas have to stand against, and he is held in universal high regard.

However, his comments regarding St Andrews Bay and the observation that it is "a travesty of good greenkeeping and traditional standards" I believe needs responding to, because he raises the issue of "progress", which is at the heart of the future direction of the greenkeeping industry. I am writing from two perspectives, namely the game of golf itself and education.

Firstly, having played the courses at St Andrews Bay I can assure your readers the inherent challenge of golf is alive and well. The fairways have the density and uniformity required to allow the ball to be worked, strategy is paramount, and perhaps not enough was made in the original interview of the selection of

traditional grasses in the greens, which are among the firmest and fastest in the area, which is saying something. When I played, hitting the green didn't mean you stayed on the green, and this from a course that doesn't claim to be a links. Colour was irrelevant.

From a wider industry perspective if the UK greenkeeping industry is going to achieve the regard and respect it craves, (reference numerous letters in past issues) then it must realise a more customer focused mentality is needed to establish relations between the committee/boardroom and the greenkeeping facility. Regarding the golfer as an uneducated job is simply going to alienate Course Managers and their staff from the very people they are working so hard for in the first place. We regularly visit St Andrews Bay with students to witness not only from Neil, but all his team, professionalism, standards of workmanship and dedication to the cause that is second to none. The cause, mind you, is golfer satisfaction. Elmwood is indeed fortunate to have such a location on its doorstep.

Whether it is appreciated or not, the demands of the modern golfer are driven by the spectacle of tournament golf. This can be a good thing in two ways. Many tour events are set up to challenge the skill of the golfer through firm and fast conditions. Montgomerie described Sawgrass as "total golf" and even Nick Faldo in last month's Golf World complained of watering heathland courses, recognising how British courses put an emphasis on shot making skills. "Let it be natural". Are these not the conditions Mr Jim Arthur has been battling for over the years, and on this evidence has been largely successful.

Secondly there will be greater emphasis on course presentation, hence the colour green at St Andrews Bay. However, the selection of recent cultivars, and indeed their colour, is no big deal if the ultimate challenge of golf is remembered.

Providing the game of golf, the greatest game of all, is a constantly evolving challenge. In order to meet modern demands, greenkeepers need to be innovative with resources, creative with advances made in turf culture and, above all, enthusiastic about improving on what has gone before.

And if traditional practices and turf species are to survive they need to stand up to comparison with what is being exported from the US. Personally, I believe the local traditional courses around St Andrews are stronger for the comparison, but to decry the dedication and management skills of Neil Ballingall is to ignore the demanding environment the modern Course Manager faces.

Ian Butcher, Lecturer in Greenkeeping, Elmwood College

## Many Thanks

May I take this opportunity to thank the Northern Region for the support I have received over the past five years that I have served on the Board of Management. I have enjoyed my time immensely.

There have been many high points over the years. One of the most memorable is having our own Headquarters owned by the Association. If we could all just reflect on how far the Association has come since the formation of the three Associations joining, we are now accepted as equals with other professional bodies in the world of golf.

This is borne out by the ClubHouse Exhibition being held at Harrogate at the same time as our own Turf Management Exhibition. Education of green keepers with the GTC (Greenkeepers Training Committee) and Colleges has enhanced our credibility in the world of golf.

We can all be proud of the Association and its members. The Open Championship, the most prestigious Golf Tournament in the world where we have our support team, only enhances our standing in the world of golf.

On a low point, more and more greenkeepers through no fault of their own are having unrealistic targets placed upon them by unprofessional people who have got themselves into a position on golf club committees, who think they know better than the qualified and trained staff. Fortunately, these golf clubs are in the minority and most golf clubs take notice of their Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper. Unfortunately some do not. Sorry about my little whinge.

I pass my best wishes onto the staff at Headquarters who sometimes get criticised unnecessarily. The Board of Management and regional committees do an excellent job along with the section committees who are there for the sole purpose for the benefit of the membership. The Association is and always will be a membership run by Association.

May I wish everyone a happy and prosperous New Year and I wish Bert Cross every success as the new Northern Regional Board of Management Representative. Once again I would like to thank the Northern Region for their support in the five years that I have served with them. I am really honoured to accept the post of Northern Region Chairman.

Ian Holoran, Middlesbrough



## St Andrews Bay Follow-up

In response to Neil Ballingall's letter (Jan issue) the connection which he, unlike many others who have contacted me, claims not to understand is that in both cases a combination of power and ignorance results in either an unsatisfactory end result or damage to an experienced and professional Course Manager's career. Too many American inspired extravaganzas have gone or are going broke to doubt this.

Perhaps it is unfair to blame someone who knows what he wants - and perhaps even what his 'clients' want i.e. lush green conditions all year round but not how to get it.

The real blame lies with those advising him, many of whom lack experience and often are motivated by a desire to be instigators of 'new' ideas, which prevents them warning their clients of the known inherent risks. As Paul Copsey (of American Golf) admits, some (many!) high cost ventures have folded or are in severe financial difficulties. Part of the reason may be wrong location, but the commonest causes are bad specification or bad construction or bad post-constructional management (or all three). Building courses in the wrong place admittedly pulls the plug quicker than bad building and bad specification, but the latter faults add huge and insupportable costs for repairs, rebuilding and just plain too expensive maintenance. In the foreseeable future golf, already commercially in decline, will predictably suffer more and only those who cut back or manage on sensibly low budgets will survive. Low budgets do not mean poor condition, often the reverse.

I have a copy letter addressed to all the members of a club that I used to advise (needless to say on a 'nitrogen only' diet but now with a new greenkeeper who has switched to heavy NPK) explaining that part of the reason for the adverse balance sheet was the "steep rise in the expenditure on chemicals".

By implication, I am accused of being old fashioned and out of date but I would point out that I am not concerned with detail but with principles. Paul Copsey may well have progressed from a Cortina but he is still driving a car with four wheels powered by an internal combustion engine, not a Tardis.

It is unrealistic to make comparisons between tee mats, worn out bent fescue and dwarf rye. Good management will ensure traditional winter tees in good order, but not if 'green-mad' golfers prevent any operations, that may temporarily inconvenience them, being implemented in summer.

The secret of good all year round condition lies in following basic principles which, like the grass, have not altered since greenkeeping began; avoiding gimmicks and educating both the members and too often the greenkeepers and their advisers, few of the latter seeming to agree among themselves.

This does not mean condemning every new idea, but it does mean evaluating them as few survive the test of time and performance but some have.

As an indication that the majority agrees with this philosophy a survey shortly to be published on fertiliser and fungicide use conducted for the R & A shows that 91% of clubs use under three tonnes - for everything - with 21% well under one tonne and only 2% used in excess of five tonnes p.a. per 18 holes. A majority (65%) use nitrogen or nitrogen with a little potash, and of the 35% using NPK more than half use very low phosphate mixes e.g. 10:2:10.

I ought also to stress that tradition is not linked solely to links and heathland. There are hundreds of first class courses, both old and new in superb condition all year round which have been maintained on sound traditional lines often for 30 years and more. Their secret is a first class greenkeeper who has the benefit of working for a convinced and intelligent club and often no green committee but a management structure.

**J H Arthur, Honorary Member**

## Contribution to the Debate

May I contribute to the current debate initiated by Jim Arthur?

As a supplier, I visit many golf courses. There are some excellent Course Managers, and there are some poor Course Managers. The former are good at communicating, delegating, and planning. The latter are not, and will not survive today's demanding standards and resulting pressures.

Successful Course Managers realise that "new golfer" is the life blood of the industry, and they have the confidence, born of experience and professional training, to put forward their case and to compromise if necessary. The key is an understanding between the Chairman of Green and the greenkeeper about what is expected and what is possible.

How can we progress? By attracting the highest calibre into the greenkeeping profession, and giving them a first class training.

**Tim Fell**

**Managing Director, Tillers Turf Company Ltd**

## Health and Safety Considerations

The recent cold snap has highlighted a concern I have had for sometime and I am hoping that through your pages a little light can be thrown on the subject.

The course closure variances from course to course undoubtedly give rise to numerous problems. Many clubs have adopted a no closure policy to avoid the aggravation of disgruntled golfers. However in this ever increasing culture of blame and litigation imagine the following scenario.

Frosty conditions underfoot and the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper keeps the course open for play. During their round a golfer slips and sustains a nasty injury and decides to sue the club for neglect on the grounds of allowing play in dangerous conditions.

The question is then asked who is responsible for deciding if the course is fit for play etc. I would hazard a guess that the finger would point in the direction of the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper.

As the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper is responsible for all matters relating to health and safety on the course, is it a fair assumption that he will have been expected to have made a risk assessment as to this hazard. If this is so how many have?

If a risk assessment has been carried and the dangers identified would it be expected that the club inform their insurance company.

Every Owner/Manager of a golf club should surely have some kind of ruling to refer to. If it already exists please excuse my ignorance and if it does not, do you think now is the time for a golfing body to establish a clear definition of when a course is fit for play.

I look forward to any comments.

One other point that you might like to include now or at some other stage, again related to health and safety, is the hazard of dog excrement. In this age of increasing environmental concerns how many other courses suffer from this unnecessary problem. The environmental impact and health implications should surely warrant greater attention from the Managers who are being faced with the problem. Has anyone done a risk assessment with regard to contamination of machinery? As I say, it is a concern but I'm not too sure where I should go with it for fear of upsetting the dog owning community.

If any of your readers has any experience of dealing with this problem I would be most interested to know. I can just imagine some of the thoughts going through your head as you read this and as funny as they are there is a serious health issue attached to the problem.

**Paul Seago, Course Manager, Gullane Golf Club, East Lothian**

## Inappropriate Photographs

I write, outlining concerns that I and many of my colleagues have regarding pictorial adverts, which often appear in the Greenkeeper International Magazine, which show a complete disregard for basic Health & Safety Regulations.

In particular I refer to female models operating machinery dressed in street clothes wearing inappropriate footwear and without facial and ear protection.

(Pages 39 Dec, 2002 and page 38: Jan 2003 are examples)

I understand fully however, that the client provides these pictures for you and is no doubt a valuable source of revenue. However, as the magazine is obviously proud of its award winning status (front page) and representative of the industry, I feel that more cognisance should be taken of the content of these pictures by your staff prior to publication and how that reflects upon the industry in general.

BIGGA has many female members and adverts such as these do nothing to help their integration within an industry, which has been a male bastion for many years. I personally find these adverts insulting and no doubt somewhere across the industry inappropriate references will have been made to the embarrassment of our female colleagues. I ask you to review this and hopefully reconsider your advertising policy and take appropriate steps to rectify the situation.

I hope that you feel this is worthy of publication in the Your Letters page of the Magazine which will give you an opportunity to explain your position to BIGGA members, many of whom share my concerns.

**Tony McLure, Head Greenkeeper,**

**Whickham Golf Club, Newcastle Upon Tyne**

## Editors Note:

Editor's Note: The photographs Tony highlights are not actually adverts but were included in the New Product section of the magazine. These are supplied, along with a press release, by the company producing the product or its PR agency. In an ideal world the perfect photograph would be used but often it is a case of using the supplied picture displaying the new product or showing no photograph at all. I have taken the view that it is better to show the product even if the photo supplied has contained the elements to which Tony refers. However, should Tony's views be shared by a significant number of others it is a policy I may review.