

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