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It is not often these days that I have the opportunity to be involved with greenkeeping or golf management related issues outside of my full time position of Regional Golf Course Superintendent and Superintendent at my own 54 hole, golf facility. However, I am currently recovering from minor surgery and find myself at home with time to respond and help Mr J. H. Arthur with his query in "How can we progress?".

Perhaps it would be easier to at first think in terms outside of golf and greenkeeping to any industry or product that has evolved & progressed through a long and successful history. We are, whether we like it or not, caught up in this all of the time, as sure as tomorrow will follow today. Think upon this, when I was a young lad I wanted to grow up and own a Ford Cortina Mark II. A great car for its day, 30 years ago, but today I transport my family around in a modern, safe, smooth, economical family-sized hatchback. Both cars, each in their own day though. If Ford still made Cortinas, no one would buy them. Commercially they have been superseded. You could go on and on, think of LPs and Compact Discs, mobile phones of 10 years ago compared to those of today, your Sinclair BBC Basic computer compared to today's latest Windows gizmo.

I now return to golf. I am a bit of a traditionalist. I would like to think I know some of golf and greenkeeping's history, and their traditional theories and practices. In fact I base most of my professional beliefs in these, but I would be an out of touch and out of work Course Manager if I did not continually learn, study, practice and monitor greenkeeping science, grasses, fertilisers, machinery, practices and, perhaps equally important, the golf market, as an industry/business and the golfer's - or can I use that word that is often forgotten by some - CUSTOMER'S expectations.

It is true that Links, Heathland or Downland golf is a fantastic and enjoyable experience, but one that the vast majority of golfers in the UK do not partake on a regular basis for reasons of location and, if truth be known, they are probably not good enough, find it too difficult, and the presentation of the course does not meet with their perception of what a golf course should perhaps look like. In the commercial world, whether an inland private or proprietary club, trying to meet the expectations of your golfing customer are fairly important. - Otherwise you go out of business!

Modern techniques, dwarf rye grasses, fertilisers, machinery etc. are tools to allow the manager of that business to strive for higher standards, improved quality, value for money for the customer, address problems of wear and playability during winter months, and contribute to the success of the business.

Take this as an example. Ask 100 golfers in December whether they want to play off a tee mat next to a tee of 300 square yards of pretty cold, poorly presented and recovering bent/fescue turf that is out of play to recover for the following season (reality may dictate that the turf is just sick poa), or actually playing off a 300 square yard grass tee of dwarf rye grass that is regularly fed, divoted, aerified still takes a mowing once a week, and does this week in, week out, throughout the year. - I know what answer you would get.

Take this further. Two courses located next to each other. One has tee mats and temporary greens in the winter, the other one has grass tees and main greens through properly applied modern management techniques. I do not need to tell you where the majority of golfers will be playing. As a side issue the owner of the course that has all the golfers, is making more money and potentially can be charging a higher rate. If it is a private club it will have many happy members that are proud of their course, club and maintenance staff.

This is the modern reality. I am sure that those behind St. Andrews Bay have done their homework and it is unfair to criticise their objectives to make money and fulfil a gap in the market with a modern style, playable golf course that offers something slightly different in an area of traditional Links courses.

It is true that some other high end "Championship" courses built in recent years have failed, but this is often down to poor market research, absurdly difficult design by a well known "Your pro that "Joe Average" just finds too hard to play. A design that is also too difficult and expensive to maintain and with grasses that are simply not tolerant of the climatic conditions or could ever cope with the amount of play needed to sustain the course as a viable business.

In summary the answer to the question of "How can we progress?" is fairly obvious. We are market led and it pains me somewhat to say that we do not as a professional body or individual greenkeepers have a modern enough understanding of our industry or business. That understanding should be complete, armed with the traditional values and practices of the past, but with the skill and professional management techniques to satisfy a modern golf industry. Perhaps we again go back to training. It pains me to say that at present we do not have enough greenkeepers with the full armoury of skills required to carry this out in the 21st Century. This may be because we have spent too much time looking back. It is perhaps also that we need to work closer with the game's other bodies to develop fully an environment that skilled greenkeepers wish to work in and receive the recognition from a more enlightened golf club operator, private club, or employer. It often disappoints me to hear what cannot be achieved on a golf course in terms of playing conditions as opposed to what can, and this often from greenkeepers. Some golfers seem to have accepted this as a norm, while some are frustrated and vent their feelings on the much-maligned Greenkeeper, who is forced to leave or is sacked. I am afraid that both parties, some greenkeepers and some golfers (club officials) are equally guilty of lack of knowledge and modern understanding.

Well after my rather long and rambling reply I am not off to bulldoze flat every Links course in the country, or over feed and water it into a stinking bog. I may just go up to work, open my locker and clean my clubs. Oh yes they are the old bladed ones I have had for nearly 20 years, with the exception of my wooden woods, with regular steel shafts. I wonder how many Greenkeeper International readers play with the latest cavity backed wonder weapons, with graphite shafts and woods that are some strange metal alloy about the size of a house brick. Perhaps that is just progress.

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