

# Fescue, Forgiven and not forgotten



**Chris Haspell makes a plea for the return to more traditional values and grasses**

After a recent National Turfgrass Foundation Conference that I attended in the UK which revolved around new techniques of turf management with some of the world's best known turf experts talking about *Agrostis palustris* or, as it is known today, *Stolonifera*, and our old friend *poa.annua*, I felt compelled to offer some hope to those in the industry who have heard the word "fescue" and indeed still believe in it as a big part of our green, tee and fairway management today.

As I left the conference I walked away in deep discussion with my colleagues wondering if, indeed, we lived in the same world as most of the speakers.

Cutting heights of 2-2.5 mm were common on the new *Agrostis* types, and speeds of 16 foot not uncommon on the stimpmeter, Architects are making greens with less undulations to accommodate this, and Stanley Zontek, from the USGA, admitted that even the Director from the USGA commented at a recent conference that the USGA were hypocritical in making recommendations that went out of the window as soon as you mentioned tournament!

However, does your Chairman of Green attend the USGA annual conference or just talk about the speed of the greens at the US Open in the bar with his friends?

Grow in of these new types of creeping Bent grasses was relatively easy. You just need to apply 25 kilos of N a week for around seven months and hey presto a fantastic green with a very large Bio Mass (when I was a lad this was called thatch) which shock horror has to be controlled! Hollow tining up to four to six times in summer, plus graden which could be visual on the greens for up to nine months afterwards. Topdressing with fine sand was the only option, for anything else could not be matted in.

Mr Zontek went on to say that the average US golf course will have a pesticide budget in the region of \$50,000. I do not know how many clubs in the UK and Europe have this size of budget but I would estimate around 1-2%. How many of these club members are aware just how much has to be done to control the thatch sorry "Bio Mass"? And how many accept you actually doing it. Staff levels on golf courses using these new Bents were also much higher.

Dr Frank Rossi, from Cornell University, told us how good poa could be on greens, we all know how poa reacts to *Fusarium*, and *Anthraco*se, The use of growth inhibitors could be used to both control and manage poa, so the question was posed if you had no chemicals how would you manage it. The simple answer from Frank was that you do not, it will die!

I have been involved in turf management around 20 years, the last eight in Denmark, and the restrictions we have are coming to the UK. Similar restrictions exist in the Netherland's, Norway, and many other European countries.

Staffing levels in Denmark are very low because of the cost of

labour, with the average course being 18, plus a par 3, plus driving range; you will find three to five staff to maintain all these areas.

With this in mind, coupled with restrictions on chemicals, we need easy-to-manage greens which do not grow vigorously and need only small amounts of nutrients. There is tax on the use of N in any form in Denmark 50 pence per kilo.

Many people have tried new creeping bent greens but with little staff and chance for maintenance the greens quickly develop thatch sorry "Bio Mass" with the swings in temperature and winter play they quickly develop disease for which we have no chemicals and poa comes in. Greens which are around five to seven years old are generally 50% poa and yet architects still want to use it.

Many people say that fescue cannot become dominant on old poa greens, and with the risk of being controversial, "Bull Excrement". The problem is even consultants advise a softly softly approach and in many cases do not want to look for or recommend its use. We have successfully transformed our greens over a seven year period from 100% Poa to a dominant bent and fescue sward. But this is not just on one course in Denmark but several golf courses are running these programmes. We have a pay-and-play course just outside Copenhagen which is 54 holes both short and long courses and the main course has in excess of 60,000 rounds a year and still maintains 95% fescue greens after 10 years even with winter play. They have a staff of 12 in summer, all fairways are fescue all greens dominant Fescue with some Bent, so for the cynics who say it just can't stand traffic the theory needs to be redressed. "Bull Excrement" I hear you say.

I think it was Jim Arthur who said "Some of the best greens are on the poorest courses" and recently I heard Walter Woods reply to a comment of water on the fairways at St Andrews, "There are cliffs around St Andrews but I do not have to jump."

I ask myself is traditional greenkeeping a dying art? There are only a few people who really know how to look after Bent/fescue left, and we need to milk all their experience before it's too late. There are far too many who simply write off the thought because they have heard it's impossible. The problem is we have become caught up in the

golfer syndrome, a need for false speed. Many of us think short is good in place of true and honest greens which still putt with pace. Unfortunately many of us use salesmen as our consultants for nutrients and there are some very good angles on sales tactics now.

On my previous course we had around 40-45,000 rounds a year. It's a parkland/woodland course and the greens stimped generally at 9 on a daily basis and this is with cutting at 5mm but with a regular light verti-cutting and topdressing program. The key to success is low fertility primarily light dressings of 8.0.0 throughout the season and around 40-60 kilos of N in a good year. Keeping the surface as dry as possible for as long as possible we try to give the poa cold turkey with a fine balance of watering to maintain a surface but enough to encourage drought stress on the poa and keep it on the back foot. This was obviously difficult at first with high-domination of poa on the greens. Anthracnose disease was actively encouraged but sensible management was required to maintain a reasonable putting surface for the membership while the transformation process from poa to Fescue was taking place.

On top of this we use seaweed around once a month and a little K in the last dressing in September and regular applications of Iron Sulphate during the winter months.

In Great Britain you only need travel to St Andrews and talk with Gordon Moir; or Kingsbarns, where Stuart McColem deserves a medal, and Chris Whittle, at Birkdale, who is reintroducing fescue and doing an excellent job. We need to change the golfers perception of how a green looks and get them to focus more on how it putts.

I am sure there are many more who share the same views, so stand up and be counted, My personal view, if my short experience is anything to go by, is that a spraying ban will also hit the UK as I see it within the next 10-15 years.

Of course, in any project, you need the backing of your club and communication is vital if you want to have the membership on your side. If you explain the facts that fungicides may soon be history to your committee, maybe they will look a little more long term and give you chance to try and reintroduce fescue and bent. What's the alternative?

Greens, which have had fusarium, which will not recover until the middle of May or even June and fall in quality towards the end of September, that's a five-month season. Will they accept that?

The facts are that a new management strategy for your greens needs to be put in place now to try and swing the poa dominance to a higher percentage of bent and fescue in your sward. For all the clubs that don't act now the future is a fall in quality and revenue and, maybe worse, members leaving your club as they seek those courses which have better prepared firm dry fescue playing surfaces all year round as opposed to playing temporary greens for five months in winter as the thatched, wet, diseased yellow poa greens at their present club are unplayable.

I am the first to admit you will never be 100% Poa free but with poa in the minority you have a chance for quick true greens.

**Chris Haspell is Greenkeeping Consultant to the Danish Golf Union.**

# MOWING?



# NO PROBLEM

Hydraulic gang mowers for *small tractors* - fine finish even in damp conditions



Ride-on triples for greens, tees and outfields



3 or 5 unit gangs for sports fields and amenity turf



Designed and manufactured in UK



Triple "wraparound" hydraulic reel mower

send for illustrated brochure:

# sisis®

SISIS EQUIPMENT (Macclesfield) LTD.,  
Hurdsfield, Macclesfield, Cheshire, SK10 2LZ

Tel: 01625 503030 Fax: 01625 427426 E-mail: info@sisis.com

[www.sisis.com](http://www.sisis.com)