

YOUR LETTERS ARE NEEDED!

Send to: Scott MacCallum, Editor, Greenkeeper International, BIGGA HOUSE, Aldwark, Alne, York YO61 1UF, or email them to: scott@bigga.co.uk

Where are the Letters?

To follow up Chris Haspell who so eloquently wrote in the magazine (March issue) about "Fescue", I sit here wondering if he and I are mad as there seems to have been a dearth of letters in backing up his thoughts. I hope this helps start a trend.

Chris expressed opinions on how many speakers at conferences are out of touch with the world we live in. I have to say I can only back this up. The speakers are without doubt extremely well educated and experienced and can rarely be faulted with their knowledge over subject matter, but, this does often seem to be a little bit out of this world. We know it isn't, but they rarely talk about the world I know about.

Chris talked about greens he had managed and over a seven year period changed them over from 100% poa to dominant bent and fescue. I have seen these greens after five years of good management practices and can say he is a little modest with his time scale. I can also back up his claims regarding the pay and play course in Copenhagen.

This is all very well but many courses do not have such a good starting point and conditions to advance this management with the same success. I am a great advocate of cultural techniques and the management of golf courses without over use of chemicals, fertilisers or water. I know it can be done as I worked at Elmwood golf course for nearly four years as Deputy Course Manager and Head Greenkeeper and never came close to resorting to fungicides. The greens there had some areas sprayed using a knapsack sprayer, once, during grow-in and to this day, I am sure will not have had any other fungicides used.

Elmwood had the benefit of well-constructed Suspended water table greens and has good air movement and was seeded with good cultivars of bent and fescue. This is all a great help. You still get disease starting but with other good management practices and careful use of irrigation and fertiliser, the disease is kept under control.

Like Chris I also have been working in Denmark, three years now, but in a different part of the country. My Danish friends inform me that the east side of Denmark where Chris works has a drier climate than the area that I have been working in. This is backed up by an article Ian Tomlinson, who works in the Copenhagen area (east side), wrote around a year ago referring to an extremely dry winter in Denmark. Where I worked during the same winter we had a September, October and November with the highest records of rain for those months ever recorded with the September rainfall being the wettest month ever in this area ie. 210mm. Then last summer this was surpassed by July with 220mm of rain. I live and work in an area with an average, supposedly, of 750mm/year. "Isn't weather unpredictable?"

Like I say I still try, we have to! as we are not allowed chemicals. I have been trying to improve the health and vigour of my grass and soil over the last two and a half years by dramatically dropping fertiliser and water levels together with a lot of aeration work, removal of thatch and replacement of poor root-zone with high performing topdressings. Last year I overseeded four times and had great success during the summer but found that it is difficult to sustain the better grasses, not surprising but over time this, I am sure, will change if my successor continues with the programme.

Drier summers where irrigation is controlled gradually to put more stress on the poa and move towards more preferable conditions for fescue/bent I feel will eventually turn the tide. I have installed a new irrigation system that allows me to sequentially water my greens heavily in one night and let them dry out a little for a day or two. Having said this and being positive is not necessarily the way to go, though. This process may take many years and requires other major works, cutting trees, and spending many hours keeping green surfaces dry with

switching/brushing, to mention only a couple of things. Is it worth it? The answer is emphatically, your decision! If it is yes what will your golfers say? Constant disruption to the putting surface, stressed poa sending up seed heads more vigorously, more healthy grass and firmer greens, that's for sure.

I have heard greenkeepers saying, "The only thing you can do if there is a chemical ban is dig up your greens and start again". I do not agree with this but it is true for many who are in a similar position as I have been.

Some can go down the route of gradually changing their grass sward, like Chris, and this has to be commended. Providing the conditions allow you to do this! Some will have to go the whole hog and rebuild and reseed, then manage greens effectively to keep poa stressed and in check.

It follows from this that fescue/bent is the way to go. If you go down the route of creeping bent, poa will come in a few short years if you are in a cold damp climate. Not a big deal if you have finances to strip off and reseed your greens every five years and manage your greens intensively. I do not have a problem with courses having creeping bent greens with high inputs of water and fertiliser and I am not even too stressed out by the use of chemicals on these greens. They do however cost more money to manage and with chemical bans you might be pushing your luck. However if the money is there, fine!

Jim Arthur criticised St Andrews Bay for not being traditional and others fear golf courses becoming "Americanised" I also fear this but I also feel that there is a place for all types of golf courses which require differing management techniques, so long as they can survive with more and more restrictions being put on them.

I was lucky enough to travel to Atlanta in February with Bernhard's and BIGGA and had a number of conversations with Superintendents from all over the US. The recurring theme was minimal interference with the playing surface, high inputs 10 times my budget for private courses and five times my budget even on pay-and-play, high staff levels of cheap labour, 18 to 30 for 18 holes and greens being torn up every four-six years. I also noted during a forum the Bernhard's group had with a delegation of Atlanta Superintendents that they were surprised at our experiences and techniques and how was it possible to maintain golf courses with so little money? I think we and our Association should be much more proactive to inform US superintendents about what we do and try to influence their management practices rather than lying down and expecting things in our continent to go the same way as the US. One note of comfort was that they also have the Augusta factor driving them mad with member's expectations.

My scribbles come to the bare facts that, we must maintain our courses in a more prudent and friendly manner with low inputs or be prepared for high costs and potential crippling disease. I am of course saying nothing new but this message has got to be put over to the golfer, your members! Our Association should be leading the way with this.

Chris asked those who agree with him to stand up and be counted, "I am" with a couple of "buts". He also talked about those older greenkeepers who have valuable knowledge with regard to bent/fescue maintenance; we have to get this knowledge transfer, as we all have much we can learn. I suggest you go back to the March issue of Greenkeeper International and read Chris's article again.

I would, very much, welcome responses to this article. especially from those greenkeepers with the knowledge to get the best from fescue/bent with cultural practices. Email Colin@topgrass.co.uk

Colin Mackay

Top-Grass Ltd, Turf Advisory Services