



Seeing is Believing

In the first of a two part series Steve Isaac, Assistant Director - Golf Course Management, The R&A, looks at how the Danish are managing fescue.

A FUTURE FOR FESCUE?

An article in the March 2003 issue of Greenkeeper International intrigued me. According to its author, Chris Haspell, there are courses in Denmark being managed to encourage fescues, not just new courses but older ones where recovery programmes from *Poa annua* dominated swards were proving successful.

This was music to the ears of our Golf Course Committee, who were looking for exemplar sites to demonstrate the principles of sustainability, as per our definition of the term: "Optimising the playing quality of the golf course in harmony with the conservation of its natural environment under economically sound management".

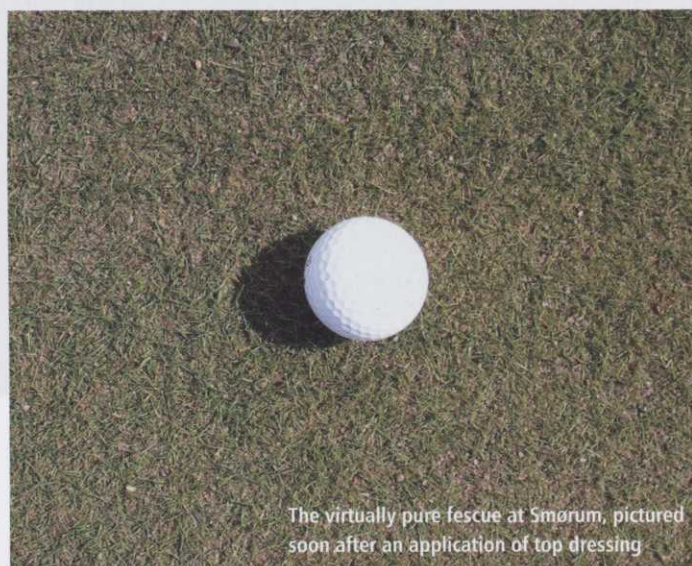
In our view, there can be no more sustainable a grass species for the northern European climate than fescue. The R&A has a long history of promoting traditional greenkeeping, the very cornerstone of which is species selection and, for temperate climates, the implementation of management that favours the fine leaved fescue and bent grasses. The 1997 R&A publication, "A Course for All Seasons", focussed on this approach, as does much of our best practice website, www.bestcourseforgolf.org. Could this be an opportunity to see the best of best practice being achieved?

However, the accumulated experience of working with UK courses available to our Committee brought a few sceptical thoughts as well! Our links and heathland courses should be the home for fescues, as they are indigenous to such landscapes, yet how many of them support fescue dominated swards today?

Depressingly few. Think of all those new course constructions that have sprung up over the last 20 years, the vast majority sown out with fescue/bent. How many of their greens have been converted to *Poa annua*? Depressingly many!

We seem to have lost the ability to manage this grass species, with many in the industry claiming it to have as much relevance to modern golf as Latin has to language. The demand for colour and pace has seen off most of the fescue on golf greens within our shores, so why believe that a country such as Denmark should be at the forefront of a fescue revival? It was with some caution that we contacted Chris and arranged a few days in Denmark to see the results of their labours.

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The virtually pure fescue at Smørum, pictured soon after an application of top dressing

DENMARK BOUND

In May 2004, Nick Park, Vice Chairman of our Committee, and I flew to Copenhagen and spent two days touring Danish courses. Our first port of call was the Smørum Golf Centre and this proved to be the jewel in the crown. The course opened in 1993 on a pay and play basis. Some may argue that having decent greens only 11 years on from opening is no great achievement. Nonsense!

How many greens to 11 year old courses in the UK still retain the grass species they were sown out with? The majority will be, at best, a mix of bent and *Poa annua*.

What about being sustainable? In our view, if you can retain the same species, which fulfil our definition, for five years or more then we believe it is justifiable to hang this tag on the sward - and only inappropriate management is then likely to cause a radical change in composition.

If God ever built a putting surface, then it would surely not be too far removed from what we saw at Smørum! The dense, fescue dominated swards had just been top dressed so were not looking at their very best, but even so they were superb. With a putter in his hand, Nick rolled the ball towards the hole... and it just kept running. The surfaces to all 54 greens on the complex were consistently good from one to another; they were true and they were fast, and all this at a 6mm height of cut.



A well presented hole in the open landscape of Smørum

Fertiliser input to the greens is exceptionally low, hovering around 35 kg/ha per year, and no pesticides are used. The main 18 hole course takes 40,000 rounds a year, which is more than most private member clubs in the UK. What a great start to our trip! Here is the epitome of the sustainable golf green. A top quality playing surface being produced with minimal environmental impact and at an extremely affordable cost.

Visits to Furesø Golf Club, Hørsholm Golf Club and Rungsted Golf Club followed, where we saw fescue introduction into creeping bent and Poa swards to varying degrees of development and success. The message from all the greenkeepers we met, though, was the same - fescue is the future of sustainable greens management, and this is why...

THE MAINTENANCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION FACTORS

The key maintenance requirements to promote fescue rather than other species, including browntop bent, are:

- A height of cut no lower than 5mm.
- Fertiliser rates at 50 kg/ha of nitrogen per annum or lower.
- Dry surfaces, with irrigation at an absolute minimum, merely to keep the grass alive.
- Regular, light top dressing to dilute organic matter accumulation.
- Overseeding with fescue at least twice a year to maintain density and purity of the sward.
- As open an environment as possible for free air movement across the green.

This programme can be handled by the seven staff at Smørum over the 54 holes, working with a range of machines commonly found at UK clubs. The results are a well presented and tidy looking course, and superb playing quality to green and fairway.

Smørum also provides evidence to disprove the contention that fescue cannot take wear. The main 18 hole course takes over 40,000 rounds a

year, through a nine month playing season. The natural disease resistance and winter hardiness of the species also extends the playing season compared to other courses in the vicinity, where winter kill and fusarium damage to Poa and creeping bent swards takes weeks off the potential season.

The driving force behind this approach is a group of Danish greenkeepers, ably led by Chris Haspell and Bente Mortensen, respectively former course and environmental consultants with the Danish Golf Union. Their focus on fescues stems from a desire to produce the best for their clients/employers in terms of quality at a realistic cost, and a wish to manage golf courses in an environmentally friendly way, in so far as this is practically possible. The latter has added significance in Denmark where there are, currently, severe restrictions on pesticide use, controls on water use and a tax on fertiliser.

The management inputs for those promoting fescue meet the environmental demands in Denmark. This is true of much of northern Europe - indeed, the former exceed the latter in many EU Member States.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Nick and I flew out of Copenhagen following our courses tour in a state of disbelief. Had we actually seen what we had been close to thinking was impossible under the constraints of the modern game? Was this a significant movement or just a few maverick greenkeepers living in the past? Could the Danish experience be transported to other countries in northern Europe facing similar environmental regulations which make Poa annua wholly unsustainable?

Could this be the spur needed to rekindle the fortunes of fescue turf to its natural home on the links and heathland courses of the UK? So many questions, so much excitement and such a need to find out more about the Danish experience.