

TALKING HEADS

Compiled by Gareth Jones

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Does Augusta National or other courses which appear on television influence your members'/clients' perceptions on how a course should look?



Name: Robert Hogarth
Region: Scottish
Years as a Greenkeeper: 19
Club: Cardrona Hotel Golf & Country Club, 18 holes
Course Type: Mature Woodland
Staff: Course Manager, plus seven

To be honest, not since I moved to Cardrona. I have experienced that in the past, but here it has been different. Having a small membership helps in that and it is important to have good communication to tell them why the course looks and plays like it does.



Name: Stuart Boyce
Region: Northern
Years as a Greenkeeper: 22
Club: Mere Golf & Country Club
Course Type: Parkland, 18 holes
Staff: Course Manager, plus 12

It is hard to say. On the one hand the American courses on TV don't do us Brits any favours as members see them and want our course to look the same in the middle of winter, which just isn't possible. On the other hand they are just happy to see the course looking and playing well.



Name: Kenny MacKay
Region: Midland
Years as a Greenkeeper: 18
Club: Marriott Forest of Arden Hotel
Course Type: Parkland, 18 holes
Staff: Course Manager, plus 18 full time and six casual

There is an influence, but I wouldn't just put it down to Augusta. In the past that might have been true, but with so much TV golf nowadays the golfer sees so many courses that they will be influenced. I also think that today's golfer travels a lot more and sees courses across the globe in different climates and that influences their opinions.



Name: Edward McCabe
Region: South West/Wales
Years as a Greenkeeper: 30
Club: Brockenhurst Manor Golf Club
Course Type: Heathland/Maturing Forest, 18 holes
Staff: Course Manager, plus six

It certainly does have an influence on our membership, but I don't let it influence how I manage my course. Satellite TV has a lot to answer for as the majority of golfers judge the course's quality on its colour, which is wrong. Personally I don't like these bright green courses that you see on TV, they look too artificial.



Name: Chris Lomas
Region: South East
Years as a Greenkeeper: 14
Club: The Berkshire
Course Type: Heathland, 36 holes
Staff: Course Manager, plus 17

Fortunately I have a very well travelled membership, who are fully aware of the climatic differences let alone the financial ones. I pity anyone who has members who feel their course should resemble Augusta in any way. It would break my members' hearts to have manicured gardens on their golf course.



Name: Kyle Irwin
Region: Ireland
Years as a Greenkeeper: 14
Club: Lurgan Golf Club
Course Type: Parkland, 18 holes
Staff: Head Greenkeeper, plus four

I definitely think so. You get the fair weather golfers coming out around this time of year and they expect to see the course looking exactly how they see courses on TV. They forget that this club doesn't have the huge budgets that other clubs have and that it is just not possible to meet those unrealistic standards.



Name: Jon Wiggett
Region: International
Years as a Greenkeeper: 11
Club: Leuk Golf Club, Valais, Switzerland
Course Type: Inland Links
Staff: Course Manager, plus four

Yes, especially here in Switzerland where there is little or no knowledge of links style courses. The course is built on a sandy soil with wall-to-wall fescue. In the early morning it looks very green but with the Mediterranean climate we have here its usually looking very brown by midday.

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Is there pressure to make your course greener in colour and inline with many of the courses seen on TV?

We don't have a huge problem with that. I am lucky in the fact that I am clearly in charge and we have total responsibility of the course. We are a business and we do have to think along those lines, but that doesn't put pressure on us to change the course.

It used to be like that, but attitudes are changing. My Chairman travels around the world and plays a lot of high profile courses. He picks things up which he wants to see on ours. We used to fertilise just to make the grass greener, but this also increased the amount of thatch we had, so we don't fertilise as much now.

Our course appears on television so the pressure comes from having the course up to the high standards required by the European Tour. So the pressure is on us to get the course right. We have ours set up similar to the US Open, so the focus is on developing the course into that type of state and standard.

There is no pressure applied to me by the club. I have been here 18 years and I have a course policy in place that the members respect. I focus my attention on the playing characteristics of the course, as that is the most important thing. Obviously we make the course as presentable as possible, but how the course actually plays is crucial.

Not at all. A luminous green heathland course is the last thing anyone wants here. In contrast they love to see it really brown off in the summer. The pressure comes from corporate/visitor golf, they often relate to what they see on TV. When you visit courses on TV you realise that producers can make anywhere look good with filters and camera work.

To a certain extent yes. The problem is that golfers don't know about grass types and the health of grass, they just like to see good colour. We installed a new putting green and we got complaints that it wasn't green enough in colour and looked unhealthy, while it actually was in great condition and very healthy.

The biggest gripe is about the lack of definition compared to the American style courses but I am fortunate that the Architect, John Chilver-Stainer, lives locally and spends a considerable amount of time at the club explaining his concept to the players. It is a sad reality, but his word carries a lot more clout than mine, except among the regular players.

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What do you do to meet your members'/clients' demands but at the same time keeping the course in a realistic and healthy state?

It is difficult to get that balance, but crucial to do so. We have Q&A sessions with the membership, which helps a lot. Some suggestions we get just won't work, and you have to be very careful to explain why it wouldn't work. We have to treat everyone, including members, as clients and you can't afford to upset or lose them.

We just try to keep the course on an even keel. There are certain things we are asked to do by the Chairman, particularly when holding events, such as speeding up greens etc. But we don't do anything that will stretch the course and put it under too much pressure.

You definitely have to have a balance. We don't go over the top on the fine turf, instead we concentrate on the rough. We fertilise the rough to get it up to the height and standard demanded, but on the fine turf we just continue to look after it how we feel fit.

We have an excellent maintenance programme in place and we concentrate on producing quality turf and fast firm greens, which is what the members notice. I like to keep the grass looking natural, I really only use our irrigation system to keep the grasses ticking over until the wet season comes instead of watering to make the grass greener.

Emphasis here is in keeping things realistic. I will cut the greens at 3mm for the summer and 5mm in the winter, which some might question, however, with judicious watering and fertiliser usage we are seeing an improvement in the indigenous grasses. We have limited fairway irrigation, which helps keep things natural, but I think we'll need to change this to keep the visitors happy.

You do try and listen to members' needs. The only thing we try to do is cosmetic improvements. This means that we are meeting members' ideas as to how the course should look and the colour the grass should be, but at the same time by doing that we are being very careful as to not damage the course.

With temperatures in the high 90's °F, free draining soil and a constant wind affecting the irrigation it is a losing battle trying to keep the grass green, so I don't try. I insure the course is always in a neat and tidy state. I have regular discussions with the members, put up pictures of links courses and have the support of the Pro.

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What is the biggest tournament you have held at the Club and how did you set up your course differently for it?

We hosted the 2004 PGA European Pro Tour Cardrona Classic. Over the last 10 years, as BIGGA has become more respected, the PGA's attitude has changed, they now ask you to change things, rather than tell you. We had the greens faster, stimping at 11 feet. We also narrowed the fairways and changed the par from 72 to 73, having five par-5's on the course.

We hold the NSPCC Charity Tournament, which many celebrities play in. We do the normal things such as lowering the cut height on the greens and we also verti-cut as much of the course as we can. We just make the course and the whole club's grounds look as presentable as possible so everyone enjoys the Tournament.

We hold the British Masters. We are given European Tour guidelines explaining how the course is to be setup, so we follow that. This doesn't really vary from what we do during the rest of the year. We grow the rough to about four inches and tighten the fairways.

The club holds major and senior country events and Pro-Am's. For these we speed up the greens slightly and cross cut the fairways, it all depends on the standard of golfer we are hosting. We like to think that we produce a high standard of course all year round, so we don't need to change too much when we do hold competitions.

Last year we held The British Men's Senior Open. With my staffing and resources we find one course tournaments straightforward, the difficulty with this was that it was staged over both courses amid heavy thunderstorms. You work your aeration and fertiliser programme around the main tournaments and we increase our cutting frequencies to whatever is required.

We don't hold any major events here, mainly club competitions. We just try and keep the course at its best for as long as we can. It allows us the time to make adjustments as and when needed, without causing big problems or disruptions.

The course is still very young but we did have the County Strokeplay here in 2003. I did not alter the course that much except for double cutting the greens and a few difficult pin placements. We had midday temperatures of 110°F and strong winds which kept the scoring high.

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Did the course take time to recover after peaking for these events?

After the PGA Tournament we have no problems. We also hosted the Bunkered Match Play in October and we were unlucky with the weather. We had so much rain that the final day had to be cancelled. What caused the problems was that the officials, TV crews, etc insisted on still using golf buggies and this really damaged the course.

It does take time to recover. We normally don't touch the course for a week after major events, we just let it rest. It depends on the weather and what that has taken out of the course. Typically we use balanced fertilisers to wake the course up and we bring the cut height up so the turf is less stressed.

After last year's event we had a lot of problems, which were mainly caused because of the large amount of rainfall we had. The course can cope with the extra play, however it is the spectator damage that hurts the course. Having that extra traffic around the place and having things like tents and marquees put up takes it toll.

We speed up our greens by top dressing, verti-cutting and maybe lightly rolling, rather than dramatically dropping our cut height. This allows the course to recover quicker. We also use stress relieving methods when needed.

Not really. It is club policy to only host amateur tournaments and they bring very little public interest so there is very little damage. We decrease the mowing frequency back to normal, usually aerate, as we try to do every few weeks anyway, and maybe give them a small tonic because we will have been keeping them very lean for obvious reasons.

Recovery is fine after these club events during the season. The biggest challenge is the recovery time in the winter, as there is now becoming a high demand for golf here during this time. We are lucky that the course holds up well during this time.

Not really, as we maintained our normal maintenance program throughout the Tournament. But at a previous club the Captain insisted on shaving the greens down below 3mm for a tournament week, which all but killed them. Afterwards we had to paint them, to the delight of most of the golfers who had never seen the putting surfaces looking so lovely and green.