

DISRUPTION VERSUS REVENUE: That Old Chestnut

By Alistair Beggs

In today's commercial world, golf clubs increasingly have to compete with one another and are very conscious of the need to impress. The demands of members and green fee payers are significant and the instant gratification society in which we live demands excellence in every quarter. The requirements of the user cover every aspect of club life but nowhere are they more important than on the course itself. Members rarely have any interest in the day-to-day workings of course management yet they expect the course to be perfect, regardless of extraneous circumstances.

At the heart of most clubs' objectives is the desire to keep the course open and playable on a year-round basis. If this can be achieved, it not only means that the members and their guests can enjoy the facility more regularly, but it also means that other revenue generating income streams are optimised as well. The appropriate management of the course is therefore the single most important factor to longer-term success. Unfortunately, with no two sites the same and no two years the same on a course, there is no successful universal blueprint for every club. However, there are fundamental principles, which if followed, provide clubs with a better opportunity of achieving success.

The single most controversial aspect of greens maintenance every year is the timing of sometimes disruptive work such as verti-draining, hollow coring, top dressing, etc. The perception of most golfers is that these treatments are always carried out when the greens are at their best, destroying the surfaces and the enjoyment of the user. There is little appreciation or understanding for the need to do the work at a given time if the treatments are to be successful. For example, top dressing can't be applied and spread in wet weather and can only be applied to growing turf. Verti-draining requirements vary enormously from site to site and depend upon levels of compaction and soil type. However, verti-drains are best employed when soils are no more than moist and certainly not when they are very wet. Too many clubs perceive this unit as a panacea and often use it inappropriately with disastrous consequences. For compaction relief, there are now other alternative techniques to consider alongside or instead of verti-draining. Tools such as the Earthquaker, ShatterMaster or equivalent are worth considering - in some circumstances they may prove to be most appropriate. Hollow coring should only be carried out in response to a specific problem and great care is needed with the timing of this operation in all its forms.

The reality is that most of these treatments, and others periodically undertaken by greenkeepers, are not too disruptive provided the user accepts the work is best done at the correct time. Some clubs have seen the light and the most successful ones do the work at the correct time, always deciding which treatments are necessary and when to undertake them well in advance. Appropriate communication between green and competitions personnel means that the needs of all are met without any aspect being compromised. How this compromise is achieved is up to individual clubs – sometimes aeration coincides with members' holidays or lulls in competition activity, others set aside specific weeks in advance so that members are forewarned. A



Verti-Drain



flexible approach is essential because the weather does not always play ball.

Sadly, at many clubs the pivotal maintenance practices so essential to the long-term health of the course, are not carried out for fear of prejudicing play and therefore income. Instead, they are delayed and often carried out at inappropriate times with poor results, poor recovery times and prolonged misery. The treatments themselves are then blamed for causing chaos when, in truth, this is rarely the case. At one club of my acquaintance verti-draining and top dressing works originally timed for late August were delayed until November – This, despite contrary advice and the better judgement of the greenkeeper! The work proceeded and was followed by heavy rain and cool temperatures. Fusarium caused chaos under top dressing that lay on the putting surfaces and destroyed 50% of the turf on some of the greens. They did not recover until late June the following year! This debacle, which should have been avoided, resulted in direct costs to the club in terms of fungicides, etc. but far more harm was done to the reputation of the club and its greens. Members departed for smoother pastures and society income went elsewhere. Greenkeeping mistakes can be very expensive and can linger for a long time! Personal agendas must not be allowed to cloud judgements and a good man who knows his site is ignored at your peril.

With modern equipment, many maintenance treatments are less disruptive than they were and can often be carried out with minimal disturbance to the course.

Golf courses will always have to be aerated and top-dressed whether Mr or Mrs User likes it or not. There is clear scientific evidence that shows that heavily played soil needs aeration to support a healthy wear and drought tolerant plant community, and pretending this is not necessary is the road to ruin! Too many have taken this route and regretted it. Far better to openly discuss what is required, plan and timetable its implementation and enjoy the benefits. There will be some minor disturbance in the short term but this does not compare with the misery you will suffer if it is poorly planned or worse ignored altogether.

Maximising revenue is about good greenkeeping, knowing the site and the prevailing weather patterns, being aware of the available remedies to overcome the problems you have, planning and discussing maintenance procedures well in advance and executing the work in a professional manner at the right time with the right equipment. There is nothing to fear because your neighbours (at least those you should be worried about) will be doing it too.

This is an updated and revised version of an article that originally appeared in Golf Club Secretary Newsletter.

Alistair Beggs is STRI's Northern Area Manager.

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