



SUSTAINABILITY – THE WAY TO GO

By James Blacklock

I find myself writing this article to address several viewpoints, most likely the source of many arguments and debates among the greenkeeping industry! However, these can only be positive points for discussion. Steve Isaac, at the R&A, encouraged me to submit this article to Greenkeeper International. It is his hope and mine that greenkeepers take the initiative and move down the ‘sustainable road’ for the future benefit of all involved. The R&A can use its vast resources to school us to the benefits of a ‘sustainable’ future, but it is up to us the custodians of our courses to take the initiative.

I am in what I like to call the ‘second generation’ in the sustainability debate. I am the Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere Golf Club, in Worsley, Manchester. I am closing in on one year ‘in the deep end’ of my new employment as previously, until February of this year, I worked at Lymm Golf Club under the tutorage of Stuart Yarwood – the founder member of the Gingerbread men! For the past six or so years we headed down the highly controversial ‘sustainability’ route. Although I’m not entirely blessed with the exact date the term ‘sustainability’ came into existence, we were, at Lymm G.C already practising this philosophy when it first became a widespread topic of discussion.

At the time of leaving for my new venture I witnessed at first hand a typical parkland course turn from a wet, thatch ridden haven for poa

annua, into an excellent, well draining, firm, dry course blessed with thriving populations of the finer fescue and bent species – especially on the greens.

Even though our approach to course management may not have been known at the time as what we now call sustainability, we were moving along that line and following the ‘Jim Arthur’ approach. I remember well the first three years or so when thatch removal and drainage improvements were the main priorities. This was a time when relaxing disturbance pressures on the greens were not the way to go! Commonplace was intensive coring and deep scarification on the greens. Every winter thereafter showed signs of drainage improvements. This, combined with selective green reconstructions and piped drainage introduced to problem greens, created an environment starting to favour the finer species. It was evident that natural bents and even fescue colonies were becoming well established.

During the last few years these finer species were also introduced via seed. This was only possible after the thatch had been all but eliminated. When we started to introduce seed to the greens, we were at the point where coring would only remove the more desirable species. We were also reducing the fertiliser and irrigation inputs annually. This really needs to be done gradually over a few years. Greens fed and watered too much are like drug addicts. They need to be weaned off slowly.

The situation I found myself in at Ellesmere was that my predecessor had left me with greens that had virtually no thatch and an excellent depth of topdressing over the years as root zone. I noticed there were natural colonies of bents especially, and a good percentage of fescue grasses. Fertiliser and irrigation inputs had been reduced over the past couple of years. The environment was perfect to use my first year as what I call a further step up the sustainability ladder. It was time to stop coring because thatch was under control, and to start introducing fescue and bent seed. Top dressing frequency was increased to every two weeks when the weather allowed during the spring and summer months. Wetting agents were applied monthly and surfaces stayed firm and dry even through the wet summer. Areas of longer rough were introduced and left to grow over the summer months before being cut down and collected late 'summer/early' autumn. The course had a very natural appearance.

I'm not saying all was rosy in the garden. I had a section of the membership who didn't take too kindly to their golf balls being swallowed up by long rough hit 50 yards off line! Some members were not impressed that during the warm dry spell in April last season, I didn't pile the water on to keep the greens soft and bright green. I resisted pressure to follow the 'green is great' notion, and noted

the annual meadow grass yellowing and showing signs of stress. I continued my policy throughout the summer and only occasional watering – mainly by hand, had a positive effect. I do think that these periods of stress levied from the irrigation systems are very effective when timed prior to over seeding on the greens. This appears to give the seedlings more of a competitive edge and chance to establish themselves at the expense of the poa.

At the Captain's dinner the Captain said the greens were the best they had been in 50 years. I might add he also wasn't too impressed by 'all the long rough this year'! I come to the conclusion that you can't win them all! I do feel, however, that it is very important for the Head Greenkeeper/Course Manager to be very strong in 'his/her' convictions. I believe if you stick to your guns and continue with what you know is best – even in the face of disapproval from sections of the membership and committees, you will emerge with a better and more sustainable golf course. I must stress though that you must communicate with the membership and committees as to what your motives are. Every golf club has a few hundred greenkeepers, each with differing opinions who think they can do a better job. With their knowledge of working in offices and business so to speak they are obviously not experts in agronomy. Even though you know that what



you are doing is right you must never lose sight of the fact that it is the members' golf course, and sometimes you have to compromise and educate them to make progress.

I think the common misconception among the greenkeeping industry, is that moving along the sustainability route will in the short term produce a downturn in the quality of playing surfaces. This is not the case as long as the greenkeeper in charge doesn't try to bite off more than he can chew. If a well-formulated 'Course Management Policy Document' is followed over several years, the greens will show signs of improvements year after year. Softly softly, gently gently and above all patience is the answer. Changes don't happen overnight and in reality it will take a couple of years to even create the right conditions to move forward. The basic fundamentals of thatch control and drainage improvements must be tackled first. If done right, this will lead to better more consistent putting surfaces.

I consider myself to be quite fortunate, as I have experienced several different approaches and philosophies towards golf course management. I completed my HND education at Muserscough College under the stewardship of Martyn Jones. A more knowledgeable man you will never meet. I worked for a year in Florida, building, growing in and subsequently maintaining a multimillion-dollar 'championship' golf course.

Every golf course is different and every situation unique in its own right. Every club's level of sustainability is different. I find myself

now, trying to keep fertiliser, irrigation and chemical applications to an absolute minimum, yet during my time in America I can remember fertilising wall-to-wall (the whole golf course!) on several occasions with complete fertilisers. Can you imagine it – fertilising the rough! Irrigation was complete coverage across the whole course and usually daily. We had a full time spray technician who just seemed to spray all day everyday – even at night! I recall in the recent STRI bulletin the agronomist Megan Hood commenting on how in the New Zealand Open in 2005 back up measures were in place artificially to green up the fairways if they weren't green enough for the tournament.

Our level of sustainability in our temperate climate is clearly different from other climatic zones. Yet we have a duty to the environment and ourselves, to make life easier. How can it not be better and easier to apply less fertiliser, less irrigation and fewer chemicals? The knock on effect on the workload is also evident. A higher percentage of finer grasses mean less coring, less verticutting and fewer disturbances as a whole. This extra time saving can be put to use elsewhere, e.g. hand mowing greens more during the summer. It seems silly not to move along this route.

The final point I make is do you have the resources to move forward? I found myself very limited in terms of available machinery and resources. Almost all work over the previous years had been done by hiring in people to do jobs such as verti draining, coring, spiking etc. After much discussion and examination of previous working methods the council agreed to completely overhaul our inventory of machines and add new items such as a new spin top dresser (with which I can top dress the greens and drag them in myself in half a day), a pro core machine (with which I will use a variety of narrow solid tines as frequently as possible next season), two new hand mowers and several other machines replacing older and possibly unreliable ones.

Part of my philosophy is to hand mow the greens as often as possible during the summer, and exclusively from Mid September to May. Heights of cuts are rarely below 5mm during the summer and 7.5mm during the winter. I have five full time staff – which I keep very fit with lots of hand mowing!

I can already hear lots of Course Managers muttering 'It will never work at my golf course.' Well the answer is simple. What are you going to do when the inevitable cutback in pesticide regulations lead to either a partial or total ban on spraying chemicals on our treasured courses? This has already started to happen across Europe. Is the membership going to be happy when on the day of the Club Championship they arrive to see their greens decimated by fusarium? Will they care that we can no longer combat this disease via fungicide applications? We must make a move to promoting the sustainable approach before it's too late. The buck stops with us the greenkeepers. We must take the initiative. We are aware of probable future changes in regulation, and if we don't act now, then we will have no one to blame but ourselves. We must not let our own ignorance be an excuse. One hundred years ago greenkeepers managed to produce the kind of fine grass dominated surfaces that we strive for, so why can't we? As a result they didn't have the disease problems we have today. Although to be fair the level of play on the courses was far less than today. I welcome debate on this issue, which can only be good for the industry.

I find it fascinating how the industry as a whole evolves and I will stick to my beliefs. I would like to commend the R&A and BIGGA for championing the sustainability cause and putting the message out there via the best course for golf website and the Greenkeeper International magazine.

James Blacklock is Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere Golf Club.



James Blacklock, Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere



James Blacklock, with Deputy Chris Shorten