



On the Soapbox

A new vehicle for people within the industry to express their viewpoint

I have been asked many times why I cut so low and put the grass plant under so much stress.

There are several reasons. As a golfer, I always like to putt on fast smooth greens. You tend to find this type of green on links and heathland courses with their sandy fescue and bent dominated sward. As soon as you come inland to clay based, Poa Annua dominated swards, the speeds drop dramatically.

I have always been amazed that the educational bodies in greenkeeping seem to suggest the same height of cut wherever your course and whatever your soil type. Looking at it logically, if you want a faster green, cut it shorter.

Simple!

Or so you would think.

The longer the grass plant, the more resistance or drag there is on the ball roll. The ball will sit in to the turf and not on top of it. The majority of courses in England suffer from this.

The dominant species on parkland soils is meadow grass which will produce a 'snakey' ball roll if cut above 3mm.

Cutting Poa Annua at 2mm maximises its potential. Agronomists and research bodies focus on the negative aspects of Poa. It was actually in the weed idents when I was at college!

You hear that it is thatchy, shallow rooting, disease ridden grass and will burn out under stress in the summer months. I disagree. It tolerates very close mowing under all kinds of environmental conditions.

Roots will only be shallow if the soil is compacted, as with all grasses. They will go down to the bottom of a verti-drain tine if given the chance. In fact the density of roots in the top 100mm (4 inches for you oldies), is quite impressive.

Disease is not a problem as long as you create a firm surface through pure sand dressings. Poa has the potential to produce the most fantastic surface, only bettered by Creeping Bent, if treated with respect and handled in the right way.

Poa can be your saviour and not your enemy given the chance.

The most important reason for cutting low is to give golfers what they want; fast true greens in all environments.

Fast greens on brand new U.S. specification creeping bent grass are relatively easy to produce. The cultivar A4 has been bred to have a high shoot density under extreme close mowing.

Producing similar results on a pure links green, with the finer grasses dominating the pace of the ball is also easily achievable.

To produce fast greens on a parkland course surrounded by trees is far more challenging. Cutting at 2mm will help you to achieve them.

We all hear the spike bar complaints about the slow pace of the greens. When you want that pay rise or new fairway mower, you are more likely to get what you want if you are giving them what they want, fast greens.

Bewarned though, as with any good green, a solid cultural plan must be in place.

Your plan must be based around these six areas:

1. Aeration. As much as you dare. Especially in the summer. This will give the roots oxygen that it craves at its most stressful time. You will also have better greens for longer in the season.

2. Sanding. No soil, just 100% sand. It is at least as important as aeration. If golfers and mowers didn't compact our greens, as long as we applied enough sand, we would have no need to punch holes in to the greens. Now the golfers would love that!

3. Verti-cutting. Essential on a Poa dominated sward in order to produce an upright grass plant. Equally important on creeping and velvet bent greens. The disturbance theorists are questioning the need for verti-cutting. Think long and hard if you are thinking of heavily reducing or eliminating it. You may regret it later.

4. Overseeding. Pure bent. As often as your budget will allow. This is for greater sward density.

5. Irrigation and fertility. Little and often. The plant must be healthy. Keep them lean but healthy.

6. Cutting. The most important operation that you do. As long as you have the above in place, frequent low cutting is a must for fast greens.

Over the years, a lot of scary stories have been circulated about greens being cut at 2mm.

It's a slippery slope' or 'It's impossible to achieve this for long periods and still have grass left' you will be told.

This is rubbish! Yes, it does need some understanding and yes, it can be intense and hard work, but this is what we as greenkeepers are here for; to give the golfers what they want in a sustainable manner.

There's a lot of talk from bodies such as the R&A and STRI, who want you to eradicate Poa.

Why? As I have already mentioned, Poa can produce the most fantastic surfaces and is sustainable.

Learn about it and understand it. You may not love it but you should certainly respect it. For the vast majority of us, we have no choice.

Anyway, on a meadow parkland environment, what is the indigenous species?

Poa of course!

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