

# SUSTAINABILITY, IT'S NOTHING NEW!

*Peter McVicar, Course Manager of Hesketh Golf Club, takes a step back into golfing history to look at sustainable golf.*

**As in every walk of life, or chosen profession, we as greenkeepers are told about “new” operations or techniques to help attain the “sacred turf” we desire.**

Currently the buzzword flying around is sustainable, I'm sure we've all heard it and have our own interpretation on what it means. What does a sustainable golf course really mean? Well the R&A say:

“A sustainable golf course optimises the playing quality of the golf course in harmony with the conservation of its natural environment under economically sound and socially responsible management”.

Sustainable development and management is fundamental to the future success of golf and to achieving The R&A's goal of having more people playing more golf on more facilities in more countries. Sustainability can only be achieved through the implementation of best practice and is only as flexible as the single limiting factor in its definition which applies to any specific site which, more often than not, will be environmental or economic considerations.

So, in my words, a course that is environmentally and economically friendly.

But surely we as greenkeepers should have been doing this since greenkeeping times began. The first course manager I can find reference to is

Alexander Munroe who tended the Links at Royal Aberdeen in 1820, surely he was thinking about these issues as he was looking after the course, incidentally he was paid £4 for his duties and two years later, this was reduced to £2.

*But let's look more in depth at these best practice guidelines...*

## 1. Mowing.

Select the right machine for the job and ensure that all cutting units are sharp to reduce potential tearing and bruising of the grass leaf, which can result in discoloration, stress and disease.

Avoid over-close mowing of the grass species being managed as this will result in stress and thinning of the sward.

Mow frequently enough to retain desirable surface characteristics, though avoid unnecessarily frequent mowing which may lead to mechanical wear of the grass.

Box off clippings to areas where minimising thatch accumulation is essential to the production of playing quality.

Vary the direction of mowing to reduce wear patterns and the development of grain.

Avoid over-close mowing of the grass species being managed as this will result in stress and thinning of the sward. This is often one of the main reasons why greens established with specially

selected species revert to annual meadow-grass (*Poa annua*).

So basically sharp blades, change direction and collect clippings.

## 2. Aeration.

Select the most appropriate tool for the job, e.g. thatch removal is best achieved with hollow cores; irrigation management can be achieved with narrow solid tines or water injection equipment.

Vary the type of aeration and the depth of penetration through the annual programme to work on all potential problems.

There is documented evidence that the course managers as far back as the late 1800's were using graips (large fork type implements) to carry out aeration practices on the course, is this not similar to verti-draining?

## 3. Top-dressing.

Usually a high sand content, bulk material. Select material compatible with, but not of a finer texture to, the growing medium.

Apply at a frequency and rate aimed to match the rate of growth and thatch accumulation.

Avoid applications which exceed the rate of growth and thatch accumulation as this will result in stressed and thin turf.

Avoid top dressing outside the growing season



Triple gang circa 1923: Slow work for man and beast (Courtesy Practical Greenkeeping by Jim Arthur)



Old Tom Morris, Peter McVicar's hero (Courtesy Practical Greenkeeping by Jim Arthur)

as this may smother turf or promote unseasonal lushness, both of which may result in disease.

Avoid top dressing when turf is under any form of stress as the abrasive nature of the dressing means working it into the turf will cause damage.

These are just three examples of the best practice guidelines, but don't you think they are very similar to what traditional greenkeepers have always been doing, others guidelines look at grasses we desire and water and fertiliser application, fescue being the best grass, apply very little fertiliser and hardly ever water, but if you have to, hand water - the best courses around (in my opinion) are the ones that water to keep the grass alive, not to keep it green.

One of my favourite old stories, is the one about the greenkeeper (back in the day) who has a rabbit problem, he goes out one morning and sees a urine burn on the green, he studies this and soon sees a lush growth around the outside, then the poa starts to get hold, this gives him the great lesson of grass and fertiliser and what it can do.

The best tool a greenkeeper has is not the computer in the office or even the verti-drain in the shed, but the eyes he has in his head, all too often people will buy something or carryout tasks without consulting the turf, just by looking and talking to the turf all the answers are there waiting.

My humble opinion on the sustainable golf course is that it's nothing more than, as another of my heroes would say "practical greenkeeping", everything being said is a repeat of what the great Jim Arthur told us years ago, and nothing more.



At Augusta, a platoon of greenkeepers cut fairways with triplex mowers, traveling in echelon

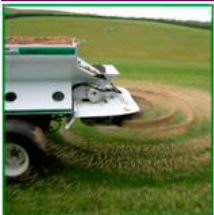
Don't get me wrong, I think the R&A are doing a great job in promoting "common sense greenkeeping", but I feel sometimes it has to be remembered that quality greenkeepers have always done this and will continue doing so.

So when somebody else asks me if I'm trying this new sustainable approach, I will smile and think of Auld Tom wandering around Prestwick before the first British Open in 1860, and reply,

"No, I'm still doing things the old way..."

"Old Tom Morris had two rules for greenkeeping, the first was Sand top-dressing, he was often heard shouting "Mair saund, Honeyman" - this was a call to his assistant to top-dress everything. He believed it was required to "maintain the character of the grass". The other was "Nae golf on Sunday". He believed the courses needed a rest even if the golfers didn't."

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