



On the Soapbox

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

End of term report. What's bothering The R&A as we go into winter? And what's on the horizon, looking into next year?

On the playing surfaces, the big worry is still the mania for speed. Not just in the UK – we find this wherever we go in the world. Low handicap golfers are the main culprits – but turf is not managed solely for their benefit and neither is it indestructible!

We are looking at giving more publicity to “advisory” speed limits, so that greenkeepers can advise their committees accordingly. Speeds of 8-8.5 feet are more than acceptable for the average golfer, who pays the bills! And if a sward is composed of the right species, speeds can be increased to 10.5 feet for short periods by rolling and top-dressing. Anything much beyond that slows play and proves stressful for most golfers – and the turf.

Finances will continue to be a big worry for clubs, as the cumulative effects of economic downturn kick in. Revenues are best maximised by a course which is playable all the year round. Costs will have to be contained and treasurers will look across the board for savings.

However, wherever savings are planned, make sure your committee is under no illusion about the consequences! Levels of presentation will have to be lower if manpower or machinery budgets come under pressure. In the longer term, of course we would argue that many clubs could save substantially on their fertiliser/water/pesticide budgets by switching away from *Poa annua* – but, again, committees need to understand the consequences and I'll touch on that again at the end.

Another trip to Denmark this year continues to focus our minds on the pesticide issue. Over there, about a third of their courses are pesticide-free because they're on public land. The other two-thirds – about 120 courses – have to deliver a 75% reduction by 2011 or face further legislation from the Danish Government. You can see the thinking: if one third of courses can manage without, why can't the rest?

Governments are not bothered about the niceties of course presentation – in today's political climate, non-golfers call the tune. And they have decided they don't like pesticides. No wonder Danish greenkeepers are turning over to fescue/bent swards so rapidly! And so successfully!

However, the new major theme in Brussels is biodiversity, or rather preventing

loss of habitat and biodiversity. Golf has a wonderful story to tell on this one – but we're only just starting to tell it. For example, we've just published a joint book with the RSPB “Birds and golf courses: a guide to habitat management”, written by Keith Duff and Nigel Symes.

The number of breeding bird species on a course, a major indicator of habitat diversity, can be significant and golf also provides a home for really threatened species such as the skylark.

Perhaps the major difficulty in promoting the positive side of golf is our lack of objective data, which can then support the story. Whether you're dealing with pesticide legislators in Brussels or debating biodiversity with sceptical environmental NGOs, it helps if you can deal in hard facts! That's part of the logic behind our data collection/benchmarking system, which we are continuing to develop.

There's a lot happening behind the scenes on this one: the first version is very compre-

part of “protection” for greenkeepers, but other support systems also need to be better developed.

The traditional one has been the agronomists' annual visit – and we still believe that agronomists play a crucial role in diagnosing problems and monitoring the long-term health of courses.

However, the Danish experience has also shown quite clearly the success of local networks of course managers in building mutual support when times get tough on a course, which, from time to time, they invariably do. Especially when switching away from *Poa annua*. We'd like to see more of those networks and we also think there's a role for senior course managers to act as mentors when such networks are absent.

So, end of term? As my old headmaster seemed to say to me every time, “could do better”.

Plenty for The R&A to go at as we look into next year – and for those who face the challenges, plenty of reasons for optimism!

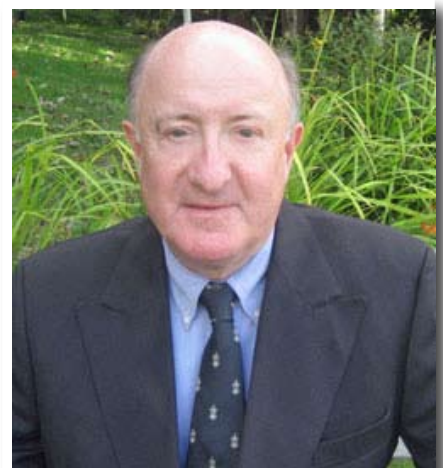
Managing the crop while the consumers trample all over it is a highly specialised business

hensive, and had to be in order to ensure its scalability/adaptability across the world. However, as time goes on we are developing systems which are specific for a country, eg. New Zealand and Denmark, as well as evolving an entry-level system which will enable clubs to collect a small number of “key performance indicators”. Most of the list of relevant indicators is coming from a consultation exercise with working greenkeepers.

Data collection, however, extends beyond the need to support golf's claims for biodiversity or reduced pesticide usage. Reliable data is a key aid to improving management practices, as well as supporting course managers in their dealings with committees. And it is that last point which is perhaps our major concern going into 2010.

Wherever we go in the world, we are faced with a common problem: how to make sure that greenkeepers are allowed to manage their courses, without unhelpful interference from golfers. Managing the crop while the consumers trample all over it is a highly specialised business and one way or the other we have to get that across to golfers!

Access to solid and reliable data is a major



Nick Park is the Advisory Member of the R&A Golf Course Committee

Nick Park



The views expressed within On The Soapbox are not necessarily those of Greenkeeper International