



On the Soapbox

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

In helping to compile Golf Monthly's biennial list of the Top 100 courses in the UK and Ireland, I am fortunate enough to play many of our finest tracks.

As a travel writer and course reviewer for the magazine, I am also lucky enough to play many wonderful courses further afield.

And as a keen but extremely wayward club golfer who enjoys visiting new places with his mates, I occasionally get to play some genuinely below-par farmers' fields as well as some criminally unheralded gems.

Happily, no matter which golfing cap I am wearing, I still get nothing but enjoyment from just about every hole on every course.

However, it strikes me that virtually every whinge and whine that I hear from a golfer is aimed at the poor, beleaguered greenkeeper.

Having said that, I would also hazard a guess that in most places, the feeling is mutual!

The cliché that the course is the club's greatest asset has become so for one simple reason; it is true. Most golfers will agree that what distinguishes a great course from a good one is the condition in which it is presented.

However, I would add three very important provisos. One is that the condition of the course should only really be judged against the resources and capabilities of its club; we cannot expect those with more modest means to be constantly in pristine nick.

The second is that the vast majority of wailing and gnashing of teeth is carried out by golfers who would not really recognise good condition if it hit them in the face with a 4-iron, and who would certainly not know where to begin to achieve it.

Finally, and most importantly, it is the playing conditions that should count, far more than the appearance of the course.

The Augusta Syndrome is a dangerous thing and accounts for ridiculous amounts of wasted effort, time and money.

The late, great, cantankerous Jim Arthur, spiritual Godfather of traditional greenkeeping, had it right when he said that it should be how the green putts rather than how it looks - that it should be how the ball rolls and how the club impacts with the turf rather than how creatively stripy and manicured the fairway looks from the tee.

That's not to say that the weeds around the steps up to the tees should be neglected, but work should be prioritised.

The key to this is communication. Those clubs that regularly broadcast what they are doing and why, are those which will create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. A regular dialogue between members and greenkeepers will give each an insight into the needs and demands of the other. This should not be confined to an annual talk by the Course Manager which so often attracts the older (and more reactionary) member, or those who come with a particular axe to grind. In many cases, the greenkeeping expert will not be a specialist in communication and will need help. Members need to be educated on budgets, the disproportionate cost of different kinds of maintenance work, the need to do certain things at certain times, and on why a long-term gain so often requires a short-term loss. Each club is different, but whether it is via newsletters, email, notice board, presentation or just informal dialogue, the staff and members need to communicate as openly and fully as possible.

your golfers and committee, but also bear in mind that this is still a service industry and your customers will usually think they are right... even when they are not.

Committees/Secretaries - trust the professionals - by all means give guidance as to the kind of course you are after, but please don't over-interfere or keep such a close and watchful eye that it stifles or undermines your greenkeeping staff who are the trained experts.

Golfers - judge the courses you play primarily by how they play, not so much by the more superficial details.

And everyone - please talk... and listen.

In these credit-crunchy times of ever-increasing competition for business, most clubs need to do everything possible to give them an edge.

While it is the playing characteristics of the course and not its appearance that are paramount, communication of this as well as getting the simple things right are more important than ever.

The relationship between golfer and greenkeeper needs to be one of give and take, or better still, give and give

Besides this, there is another simple way in which green staff can help their cause. I was playing at a course in Surrey in August where the approach to one short par-4 demands an accurate shot across water. A greenkeeper was working alone on the drainage at the front of the green but kept my group waiting several minutes before even acknowledging that we existed. He then gave us a single wave of his arm but didn't bother moving out of the way, thus making an intimidating shot even more imposing. You will not have to work hard to guess what happened to my ball!

Earlier in the round, we had been followed by the same grass-cutter for several holes. He didn't seem to realise that cutting the holes in the opposite sequence to play would mean that golfers would receive minimum interruption from both noise and the need to wait!

The relationship between golfer and greenkeeper needs to be one of give and take, or better still, give and give. Strangely enough, we all want the same thing which is for the course to be enjoyable as possible.

The point I am trying to make is this...

Greenkeepers - stick to your guns, educate



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