



Keep it Simple

What can be done on the golf course to ensure standards are maintained during a period when budgets are being cut and finance is at a premium. Les Howkins MG, Course Manager at The Richmond Golf Club, in Surrey, offers some advice on how to make a difference without raiding the piggy bank.

It is an accepted truism that the golf course is a golf club's greatest asset, but it will only remain so if it is maintained to the best standard the budget will allow and does not deteriorate.

Master Greenkeeper Les Howkins is well aware of the need to keep quality high but also knows that the need to do so cost effectively is of paramount importance.

"I'm pretty lucky here, we are increasing membership and are bringing in more green fees but I also remember where I've come from, working at golf clubs where budgets were tight and life was a bit more of a struggle," he explained.

With that in mind, and being a northerner, he has a keen appreciation of the value of money and employs many low or no cost techniques which make a real difference.

"Top of the list is to keep things clean and tidy. For example, it doesn't cost money to take a bucket of water and a sponge and wash down the flag pins. It's dead simple. Also for the cost of a can of paint and a little bit of effort you can have the tee markers and the hazard posts looking fresh."

It does sound simple. So simple,

in fact, that you do wonder why you ever seen neglected flag sticks or scruffy furniture on any golf course, but Les has a theory on that.

"I believe that a lot of greenkeepers think about tees, fairways and greens, first, second and last. I remember when I went to college it was all about turf quality and never once was I told of the importance of keeping the golf course neat and tidy. Keeping markers painted and paths weeded etc is still not part of the NVQ system.

"People tend to focus on the element that they spend a lot of money on – fungicide, fertiliser, top dressing, aeration, cutting and put all their effort into that. However, they could have the best greens in the world but if nothing else is up to scratch people won't go and play it," said Les.

"They are all things that don't necessarily stand out when they are done well, but they certainly do stand out if they are not right."

Another area where resources can be shepherded more effectively is cutting regimes.

"There is no point in diamond cutting a fairway that takes however many hours when you can get just as good a quality of surface by block cutting half and half in a frac-

tion of the time which then frees up manpower to weed paths and edge bunkers.

"It's also fantastic if you can hand mow greens but if you have had to make a member of staff redundant if you have a ride-one use it as it saves a lot of time and manpower which can be used elsewhere on the course."

However, Les is quick to put something else into the equation if changes to course management procedures are to take place.

"Communication is the key. If you are making changes to the way you cut, or have decided to rake the bunkers three times a week instead of four, it is important that you inform the members and explain the reason to them."

And ideally this doesn't just mean sticking a notice up in the locker room.

"Emails are great. Most clubs have a database of email addresses and it takes seconds to send a message to all the members and costs nothing. If it's chucking it down and the course is wet, we'll inform them. If it's frosty, we tell them. It's a really good way of communicating and makes the member feel he or she is being considered."

Les is also an advocate of having



Les Howkins MG, Course Manager



A marker post in need of a coat of paint



the set of standards the greenkeeping team works to written down.

“Everyone should know the standards that you work to – General Managers, Committees, staff etc, and if any changes are made these should be made known. It’s like the Policy Document and would include things like the number of times you rake the bunkers, cut the fairways etc.”

Working out how many hours are spent doing various tasks through the week also makes it much easier to identify what jobs would have to be dispensed with should the man hours available to the Course Manager be reduced through a reduction in overtime or redundancy.

It says much for the skills of the country’s Course Managers that even with cut backs at many golf clubs over the last 18 months standards have been maintained or even raised.

“You have to be adaptable, roll with the punches and move with the times. You can’t be stuck in your ways.

“There is nothing in our job that we can’t do. There is always an answer and a way of making something work but when it comes to the longer term those with bents and fescues greens will probably

cope better financially. They will have fewer inputs, less disease, less fungicide so money and time spent maintaining them is always going to be less, but you can’t change to a more sustainable approach overnight so it’s a long term project.

“People can work towards this though because the next recession is only 10-15 years away. It’s one of those facts of life. It goes round in circles,” warned Les.

Off the course Les is also a great advocate of personal development and has some advice that can keep that on track without costing a penny.

“Training can be quite expensive, particularly if money is tight but it is important to keep it up and it can be done even if you have virtually no budget at all.

With the BIGGA Library you can be sitting at home in an evening adding to your knowledge for just the cost of return postage.

Section Training events can also be very useful and can be for a little as £15-£20 a day. Not a lot of money and something you can always pay out of your own pocket if the club has no money in the training budget.

The Government fund some NVQ training for the younger greenkeep-

ers and is a good way of motivating if no pay rise is available.”

Les is very much of the view that the way to succeed is to be the best club of your type in the area.

“You want to be the best club full stop but if you can’t be that you’ve got to be the best you can be in your target market. If you are at a lower end pay-and-play you make sure you are better than the next nearest lower end play-and-play.

“It’s a case of doing the right things, keeping it simple and not making it over frilly.”

ABOVE: Manor House GC at Castle Coombe, taken by Gian Povey, and showing how good a course can look.

BELOW: Example of a well raked bunker

