



On the Soapbox

GTC Chairman, Donald Steel, takes to the soapbox and looks at how greenkeepers learn and keep updating their knowledge

It has long been open to wonder whether Club golfers are aware of the annual contribution they pay to the coffers of their County and National Unions.

Even more doubtful is whether they know how it is spent.

The major proportion is directed at causes from which they derive no benefit but there is one glorious exception.

It lies in the support they lend to The Greenkeepers Training Committee which has brought about a transformation in the way our golf courses are prepared and presented.

All of a sudden, everyone is a winner.

In 25 years, the standard and quality of the greenkeepers' art has improved to a point where, in many cases, results are little short of perfection.

At the same time, the standing of greenkeepers in the golfing world has risen accordingly.

There are several explanations but none more deserving of praise than the education received both from the GTC and the respected band of Course Managers who set such an excellent practical example.

All golfing administrative bodies exist to promote the playing of the game but, without our golf courses, there would be no game.

Courses are a Club's priceless asset, the sole reason for bringing us together. They are the fount of our inspiration and enjoyment but, as standards rise, so, too, do expectations. Golfers have always had plenty to say (much in ignorance) on conditions they confront but, as they travel more, and see more on television, most no longer tolerate less than the best.

Not long ago, greenkeeping was more of a job than a calling. Workers were often agricultural recruits on a basic wage, operating from headquarters that were little more than barns and sheds.

Head Greenkeepers invariably had long experience and were undoubtedly men of the soil although they were often reluctant to share their secrets and many took them to their graves.

In consequence, those under them learned as best they could but they weren't frightened of hard toil. Those used to the technical age might shudder at the thought of cutting greens with push-mowers and walking between holes, raking bunkers on the way.

It is unquestionable that, in addition to organised training, course conditioning has been revolutionised by the ability of modern mowers to cut grass as low as conceivably sensible together with new (or replacement) strains of grasses that allow impeccable playing surfaces.

It bears out five time Open Champion, Peter Thomson's, contention that greenkeeping is the art of keeping grass down rather than getting it to grow. Not that all the mechanisation has replaced the need for long hours.

The daily schedule during a European Tour event that I attended last year consisted of cutting greens before and after play, being on hand in case heavy rain necessitated emergency measures and maintaining a 24-hour vigil that for some meant sleeping on the premises.

Normal routine at any Club in summer involves getting ahead of the golfers and casting a wary eye over the small items that make the difference between mediocrity and excellence.

The need for better education dates back to the urging of one or two notable individuals in the 1970s and 1980s and to awareness of golf course architects who felt there was no point building fine new courses if there weren't enough qualified green keepers to look after them.

This led to the establishment of the GTC whose Technical Committee compiled a syllabus for lecturers at chosen Colleges to dispense. By that means, young greenkeepers, attending the courses, had new recognised qualifications by the end of them.

These became more and more important as passports to jobs, an increasing number of young men and women setting out their stall in making greenkeeping a career.

Clubs can put forward their own candidates for little more than a registration fee or the initiative can come from the individuals themselves.

However, nowadays lecturers from the colleges make things easier by visiting the Clubs to impart knowledge or students can study from the internet in their own greenkeeping complexes.

Without conveying the impression that

greenkeeping is a mystic art, the industry has become more complex.

The principles are the same. It is the way of implementing them that is different. Co-operation and camaraderie is more evident, showing itself, for instance, in the voluntary efforts of neighbouring support teams who assist with on course work, including bunker raking and divoting during a major tournament.

There is a greater pooling of knowledge in road shows, conventions and exhibitions to highlight the shop window but the main aim is to please the golfer.

One look at any golf course is enough to reveal whether it is tended with love and care.

The same impression is apparent on entering any house or hotel but at least golfers can identify that it is all being directed at them and that their money is being well spent.

It would be cheap at twice the price.

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Donald Steel is Chairman of the Greenkeepers Training Committee

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