



Greenkeepers Training Committee



GTC Chairman, Donald Steel, highlights the welcome words of the new USGA Chairman who wants to make “brown the new green” and move towards a more sustainable game

Those leading the crusade for sustainable golf will have a fight on their hands converting the Augusta National Golf Club.

It might be easier to abolish baseball as America’s primary sport.

British greenkeepers have long held the view that The Masters sends all the wrong vibes where course preparation is concerned but they may perhaps be surprised that they have an ally in the new President of the United States Golf Association, Jim Hyler.

In a keynote address in February, he led the charge to make “brown the new green”, amplifying his message by contending “many of the standards by which we construct and maintain our courses have become, quite simply, unsustainable”.

Hyler focused principally on the environment, noting that maintenance practices that are environmentally friendly are also cost efficient, a crucial consideration for the survival of some courses in these economic times.

In a Press Release, “Back to Basics” (where have I heard that before?), he highlights the myth that a great golf course has to blind the eye with greenness.

“I believe that our definition of playability should include concepts of firm, fast, and yes, even brown, and allow the running game to flourish”.

He rightly applauded the USGA’s Green Service staff who, in the teeth of the recession, published a report last year entitled “Dollars and Sense: making it in a tough economy”.

This listed 14 different areas in which courses can be more cost-efficient, including water use.

He also referred to the USGA’s Green Section as “our best kept secret” but here his admission should have been consumed by embarrassment.

As long ago as 1977, the then National Director of the USGA

Green Section, Dr Alexander Radko wrote a scholarly article in the now sadly defunct USGA Journal that was both eye-opener and trail-blazer.

Under the banner “Green is not Great”, it punctured most emphatically many of the beliefs among golfers who are self-appointed technical experts- a large majority of those playing the game.

It was for a while compulsory reading and can be found on the GTC website. It is well worth devouring.

For the good of the soul, I hasten to quote extracts such as “Many people have the mistaken notion that the greener the grass, the healthier the turf.

Unfortunately, this notion is especially strong among golfers.

They equate dark green with good playing turf, and they often refer to it as beautifully lush turf!

Those trained in the study of turfgrass cringe at this description. To them lush means undesirable, soft, succulent, out of condition”.

Radko was critical that too often things are done for cosmetic reasons rather than because it is the best thing to do, adding:

“The pressure of membership has great bearing on the golf course management scene.

“It has spawned poa annua (annual meadow grass) oriented thinking because, in reality, that is what some memberships want.

“Poa annua, an unreliable annual grass, is considered a weed by some but a good turf cover by others”.

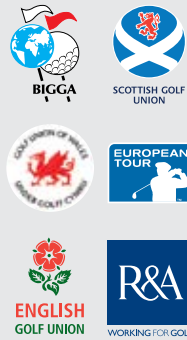
Experts all over the world agree poa annua is the most common problem in greenkeeping, shallow rooting and requiring more water and fertiliser to survive that other grasses but, as Radko went on, “the result is a forced growth of grasses that makes them uniformly greener but this does not mean the condition is better for golf.

A forced growth is not a healthy

In Brief

The new USGA Chairman has called for a Back to Basics approach to course management and applauded the work of his own USGA Green Section. Donald Steel welcomes this approach but reveals that we have been here before.

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one. Over-watering is one of the cardinal sins of turfgrass management”.

One of the sadder aspects of the saga is that Radko’s article was written by an American for an exclusively American readership; and yet, here 33 years later, the President of the same organisation is “preaching” as though theories on sustainability are something new although it is not the first time our governing bodies have failed to drive home powerful issues.

In 2003, Bill Campbell, former President of the USGA and former Captain of the R&A, and a universally respected figure, commented that “ongoing increases in driving yardages are indefensible and not in the game’s interests” but his influence in getting something done has been no more successful than Radko’s.

Golf has a habit of not listening to its experts but Campbell also had wise words to say in 1983 in addressing the Golf Course Superintendents of America – words that have gone largely unheeded as well- certainly over here.

“Communication is important in any endeavour, but it is crucial for golfers to develop a close relationship with their Golf Course Superintendents.

If the Club has a Green Chairman who is really effective, really trusted, and works well with the Superintendent, the club ought to keep him in that position for as long as it can”.

The formula that doesn’t work is a change of Chairman annually but now that Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers are so highly qualified, Green Committees are surplus to requirements.

Campbell believed that “the ideal solution would be one where all golfers are educated enough to appreciate the role of the Golf Course Superintendent”.

If only it were true. To read Al Radko’s article visit:

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