



On the Soapbox

A vehicle for letting people within the industry express their point of view, this month with golf enthusiast, Lorne Smith

It is only natural that club golfers are influenced by golf as depicted on the television, where the emphasis is on long driving, slow play and fast putting surfaces for professional players.

The problems arise when they want the 'Augusta syndrome', or similar, at their home course.

Fine Golf is a campaign that seeks to raise the profile of the 'traditional classic game' in golf course design and upkeep in comparison with 'lush, target golf' and encourages club members to support their local greenkeepers in following sustainable principles of the kind advocated by Jim Arthur.

How we came to launch the website.

Some 45 years ago, Frank Pennink's *Golfer's Companion* helped me choose which golf courses to play in the Dublin area while planning a week's golf holiday. Being a champion golfer and renowned Course Architect, Pennink knew what he was talking about. It subsequently took me 40 more years to play all 128 of the finest courses across the British Isles and Ireland recommended in his book.

As an ordinary golfer, I was also lucky to come across Jim Arthur's book *Practical Greenkeeping* which provided the key to what these courses, by the sea, on heathland, moorland and downland, had that made them the finest and most enjoyable. I realised it is the firm, dry, fine turf on these courses.

I run an Executive Search consultancy to earn my crust but in 2008 the market fell off a cliff. In the spare time I now had, I decided to launch the website as an update to Pennink's book and to promote Jim Arthur's sustainable methods.

One defining aspect of Fine Golf is its 'Joy to be Alive' feeling.

The British Isles is lucky to have a heritage of the finest golf courses in the world, because our climate allows fine grasses to flourish on areas of poor soil that were not wanted for agriculture.

There are about 2,800 golf courses in the UK and Ireland and some 200 of them can be defined as 'fine'. These are identified by geographical area on finegolf and I have played 175 of them so far.

It is simply not possible to rank courses scientifically and so we have developed the concept of a 'joy to be alive' Fine Golf factor to indicate the level of delight they give.

The costly 'lush, target' game is under pressure

Lush, target golf 'was initially promoted

in the UK by the likes of the quadruple Open Champion, Bobby Locke, from South Africa, in the 1960s/70s (although he was pretty good at the scuttle stuff on firm ground, and was clever enough to adapt his own game to lush American conditions) he suggested that British professional golfers needed to learn how to shoot for the pin, not just the green, in order to beat the Americans. As a result, over-watered greens became the fashion.

However, the real growth era for 'lush, target golf' was in the 1980s/90s during the golf course construction boom when the big, bulldozered, internationally designed courses appeared on ground chosen primarily for commercial reasons near large conurbations rather than for its grasses and natural drainage.

Many tour professionals prefer to play on 'lush target' courses with their predictability of bounce, while commercial television loves the drama of 'signature' holes over water. But as Jim Arthur said "Since when did golf become a water sport?"

The characteristic features of these courses, with their 'pudding' greens in the colder months, are the excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides with consequent pollution, the overuse of water and their enormous maintenance budgets. They do not fit these recessionary times nor the best future for our fine game when the vast majority of ordinary golfers would prefer to play on the likes of courses as listed on the site if given the chance.

www.finegolf.co.uk is part of the re-emergence of the Fine Golf trend.

Today there is a discernible trend back towards Fine Golf

Examples of this are:

1. Everywhere golf clubs are looking to reduce costs and develop sustainable practices.

2. The R&A has invested heavily in the website www.bestcourseforgolf.org

3. The USGA has created a new tool to measure turf firmness;

4. The traditional greenkeeping Gingerbread movement is expanding;

5. New course developments, like Castle Stuart, The Renaissance and Menei (Trump), all elected to put down fine grasses, as does the new hotel-owned Spey Valley;

6. New regulations on clubhead grooves, promotes the fine game.

Greenkeepers are a vital element in the trend back to fine golf.

Greenkeepers have to satisfy their

customers and we all know that among a membership Club of 500 there can be 500 expert "agronomists"! The ability of Course Managers to communicate coherently through the mediums of newsletters, a page on the Club website and in front of a meeting of members is crucial.

Fine Golf looks to give support and build the confidence of course managers in standing up and fighting for what they know is best long term, which is not necessarily the same as that promoted by television golf, due to those courses being prepared exclusively for that event with little expense spared and should be described as such to avoid misunderstandings.

The site is entirely independent and supported by all progressive golf people and organisations that want to see traditional, classic golf regain its historical importance.

What can you do?

Become a friend of Fine Golf, register on the home page of www.finegolf.co.uk to receive our free newsletter to let you know when new reviews and articles are published and pass on the news to your friends.

The campaign for Fine Golf welcomes your support



Lorne Smith is a golf enthusiast who has set up his own website promoting Fine Golf

Lorne Smith

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