



On the Soapbox

Colin Callander looks at what is required of the modern day Course Director

There are some jobs that nobody in their right mind would ever touch with a barge pole.

It would be fair to say, for example, that I have never had even the slightest inclination to sign up as a Cat Food Quality Controller, although I assume somebody has to do it, and nor would I have exhibited even a modicum of enthusiasm had it ever been suggested that I should apply for the role of Chief Shoe Cleaner for Imelda Marcos.

I mention this here for the simple reason that eight months ago, when I accepted the invitation to become Greens Director at my local golf club, Welwyn Garden City GC, at least a dozen of my friends told me that I must have lost my marbles.

Long-standing acquaintances were particularly perplexed because they knew that about 20 years ago I had fulfilled a similar role at a previous club in Scotland and so automatically assumed that I should have known better than to agree.

I have numerous golfing acquaintances who would tell you they would rather have all their teeth removed without an anaesthetic than to become the Greens Director or Greens Convenor at their golf club but I'm not one of them and I can confirm nothing has happened over the last eight months to make me change my mind. Indeed, I have enjoyed the role immensely. I'm not sure our excellent Course Manager, Brett Cox, and his hard-working team would be quite as enthusiastic but, hopefully, they would agree I have done my bit and, much more importantly, let them get on with theirs.

A few months ago, Scott MacCallum, the Editor of this magazine and a former colleague of mine, both at The Courier newspaper and Golf Monthly magazine, asked me to pen some thoughts on the role of a Course Director. I have no idea why he chose me rather than, say, Malcolm Peake, an expert of many years standing and the author of the hugely informative and entertaining Confessions of a Chairman of the Green, or for that matter Nick Park, a respected R&A consultant and the co-author of Golf Monthly's highly influential series, The Management of British Golf Courses. But I had no desire to offend him, so somewhat reluctantly I agreed.

My remit was to come up with some thoughts on what made a successful Course Director but, before I get down to that, it might be worth highlighting the biggest mistake any wannabe Course Director can make, namely to believe the job title,

not to mention his reputation for having green fingers in his garden, gives him the right to dictate how the Course Manager maintains and manages the golf course. Unfortunately, that happens, as readers of this magazine will know. In fact, it would be fair to say it happens more frequently than any of us would care to admit.

I am a journalist. Other Course Directors I know are doctors, dentists, businessmen, civil servants, teachers and accountants. We all have our own individual skill sets but, apart from the dentists, the aforementioned Messrs Peake and Park, we have little knowledge about how to manage turf grass, we are not necessarily au fait all with the recent advances in fertilisers and we probably couldn't even tell you the difference between a Nematode and a Common Toad so have absolutely no right whatsoever to dictate to our highly trained greens staff what to do when it comes to presenting the golf course for our members. That would be nonsensical, surely, not to mention dangerous for all concerned

To me, the role of the Greens Director

or Greens Convenor is relatively simple and it is to liaise, on behalf of the Board or Committee, with the Course Manager or Head Greenkeeper on all matters relating to Course management, maintenance and development. Together, the Greens Director and Course Manager will set an annual budget, agree a course maintenance policy and devise a rolling course improvement strategy, all of which then have to be agreed at Board or Committee level. Sometimes, perhaps during spells of inclement weather or, for example, while a concerted effort is being made to rid the greens of meadow grass, the Course Director will have to act as a buffer between the Greenkeeper and irate members. That is inevitable, not to mention uncomfortable. However, for the rest of the time, when the course is deemed to be in good condition, the same Course Director can bask in praise he scarcely deserves.

It is not rocket science, I can assure you, and it can be made even less problematical if every effort is made to tell members in advance when vertidrainage, hollow coring and top dressing and other such work is to be done.

Good communication is vital for any club

that wants to minimise frustration and adverse comments from its members. This winter, we have undertaken a considerable amount of course improvement work, necessitating some holes being out of play for long periods at a time. However, because we intimated in advance what would be done and what disruption would be caused, complaints have been minimal. In contrast, we omitted to publish a coherent policy on when carts and caddie cars could, or could not, be used in adverse weather conditions and this has led to uncertainty and considerable adverse comment.

The ultimate goal is to produce an exhaustive Course Policy Document outlining everything from how the course is to be managed, the expected standards of maintenance, a five-year plan for course improvements right down to information on when the course will be closed in the event of bad weather, when winter greens will be used and when golfers will be allowed out with carry bags only.

That way, the greens staff will have guidelines to work to and the rest of us will also know exactly where we stand.

Nematodes and common toads



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