

Question time

We teamed up with Today's Golfer magazine to discover BIGGA members' opinions of golfers – the first ever such survey of the nation's greenkeepers. Read on for the thought-provoking responses

The vast majority of greenkeepers communicate with members...74% of golfers directly blame greenkeepers if the course is below expectations...almost half of golfers repair pitch marks badly.

These are just some of the fascinating findings after Today's Golfer surveyed BIGGA members recently, and published the results in their latest issue.

Today's Golfer acknowledged that golfers are quick to criticise when they feel elements of the course are unsatisfactory, but slow to praise greenkeepers when the course looks good and plays great. So they contacted us and together we came up with the survey. Its aim was to help golfers across the UK understand in more detail the skill and hard work that enables them to play on well maintained courses and show greater appreciation of the huge amount of work that goes into maintaining a golf course.

Thanks to the BIGGA members who responded – the results were very interesting – and all responses will remain anonymous. Today's Golfer enjoys a large readership and BIGGA hopes that this survey will not only raise the profile of greenkeeping but educate golfers on the intricacies of the industry.

It's clear that communication and education are the key words when it comes to increasing the respect golfers have for greenkeepers, and a lack of understanding of a greenkeepers' role is a real bugbear. On a lighter note, some of the respondents revealed some hilarious and bizarre tales of strange behaviour from golfers – turn to 'what's the funniest/weirdest thing you've seen a player do/say?' for more.

The survey is reproduced here in full with the kind permission of Today's Golfer.

EXCLUSIVE SURVEY

WHAT BRITAIN'S GREENKEEPERS REALLY THINK OF YOU

...test... more than half of us don't repair the best courses on the cheap. These in the first ever greenkeepers survey

FREE FOR EVERY READER 3 NEW TAYLORMADE LETHAL BALLS + 2-FORE!-1 VOUCHER + GOLF INSURANCE

WWW.TODAYSGOLFER.CO.UK

Today's Golfer

BRITAIN'S BIGGEST-SELLING GOLF MAGAZINE

INSTINCT v LESSONS
We try 'Bubble golf' with surprising results

9 NEW BALLS TO TRY
From Titleist, TaylorMade, Bridgestone, Callaway & Dunlop

GREENKEEPERS HAVE THEIR SAY
'Most golfers don't look after their course'

WHY YOU NEED MORE LOFT

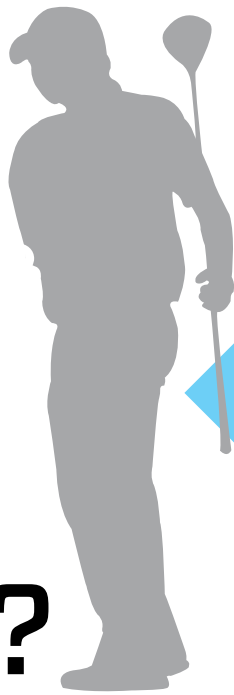
GET PERFECT IMPACT EVERY TIME

HIT MORE GREENS

WITH EVERY IRON IN YOUR BAG

PLUS FIVE NEW SETS OF IRONS REVEALED > PSYCHOLOGY OF WINNING WITH G-MAC > BOB VOKEY'S WEDGE ADVICE

How do you feel you are perceived by golfers?

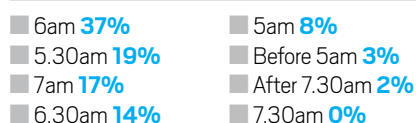


“As people who just mow grass and cut down trees, there is no understanding of what and why we do work, but I ask them: ‘What would happen to their garden if they walked up and down it 200 times a day?’”

The majority of greenkeepers feel they are respected by most of their club's members, but this can be undermined by a lack of understanding of what is required to maintain good playing qualities and a small proportion of golfers who do not respect them and question their abilities. More and more golfers have started to view greenkeepers as professionals in the last five years, but, according to the men themselves, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

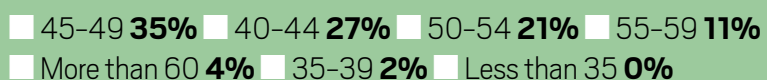
“There definitely is a mixed perception of greenkeepers by golfers. There are those who can appreciate the difficulties in maintaining year-round quality surfaces, and then there are those who expect to play a well-maintained course whenever they want, whatever the weather with no disruption to play from greenkeeping practices. The latter tend to view the greenkeeper as the enemy and see any course closures as his fault. Unfortunately, they can often be the more vocal.”

“I think they view us as very important in the overall running of the golf club. They realise that without us there would not be a course for them to play on. They also think sometimes that we do things to annoy them (aerate, top dress etc) but in reality these tasks are essential and the majority of the membership totally understand the actions we take. We have a good relationship with our members but it has to be worked at; communication at all times with them is the key to a good relationship.”



Two-thirds of greenkeepers are on the course before 6am during the season so spare a thought for them when your 6.30am alarm call shocks you awake for that 8am tee time. Every greenkeeper in the land will be well into their working day by the time you hit a ball.

HOW MANY HOURS A WEEK DO YOU WORK IN THE SUMMER?



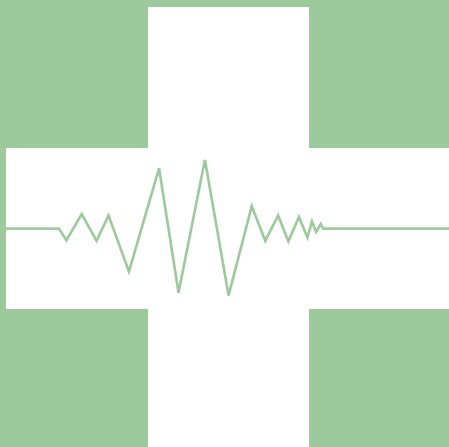
During the summer months virtually every greenkeeper in Britain works more than the UK full-time average of 37 hours a week. For the 36 per cent that work more than 50 hours, that works out at a minimum of eight hours and 20 minutes a day, six days a week. The equivalent of working 9am-6.20pm with a one-hour lunch break from Monday to Saturday.

What level of interaction do you have with club golfers?



The vast majority of greenkeepers are attempting to interact and communicate with their members, but many feel their voice isn't always heard. This is a two-way street so look

out for ways to learn more about course maintenance and don't be afraid to ask your greenkeepers questions. They know what they're talking about and will always be willing to help. ■



WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO EDUCATE PLAYERS ABOUT COURSE CARE?

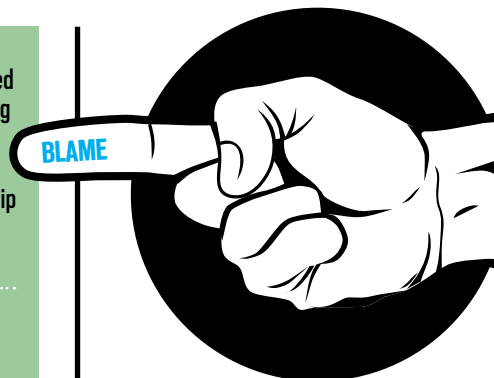
Greenkeepers feel that communication and helpful education is the key here, whether that's the introduction of a short test, more information in media golf coverage, etiquette lessons for new players or regular newsletters and meetings for existing members.

“When new members are introduced to the club they should have training on the correct ways to repair pitch marks and divots etc. Letters should be included with membership renewals reminding golfers of their duties to protect their course.”

“Pros should make time in their lessons to inform golfers of course care and etiquette (which our pro does).”

“Perhaps educational nights combined with a bit of fun. It takes years to learn how to look after a golf course properly so just teaching relevant aspects would be beneficial. I've had members complaining about areas of the golf course and directly blaming green staff only for them to realise after discussions and explanation that the problems are caused by uneducated golfers.”

“Each club should provide free pitch mark repair tools and educate them to respect their fellow golfers and leave each area of the course as they found it.”



DO GOLFERS DIRECTLY BLAME YOU IF THEY FEEL THE COURSE HAS NOT MET THEIR EXPECTATIONS?

Yes 74% No 26%

It's right and understandable that greenkeepers are held to account for course condition, but they can't control the weather and many face decreasing budgets. These factors have to be taken into account when assessing how good a job is being done. After the wettest summer in 100 years and a horrible winter, it's likely your garden probably isn't looking its best, especially if you're spending less on it. Greenkeepers are fighting the same problems, but on a far larger scale.

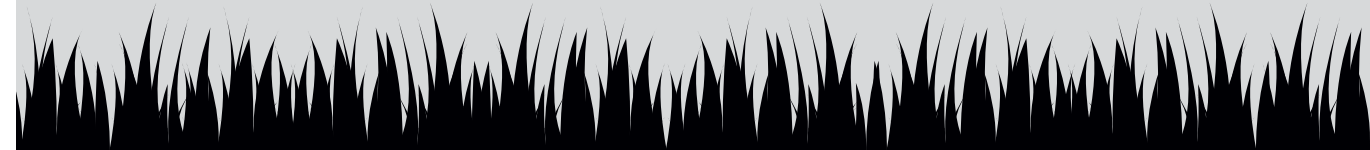
How good are golfers at putting divots back?

- Average **58%**
- Bad **25%**
- Good **12%**
- Very bad **4%**
- Very good **1%**

It seems we're a bit better at replacing divots than repairing pitch marks, but with 29 per cent of golfers still below the required standard there is plenty of room for

improvement. It only takes a few seconds to replace a divot or fill one with sand (if it has been provided). It also goes a long way to improving the look and

playability of your golf course and can save the greenkeepers valuable time that could be spent repairing or improving other areas of the course.



IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES GOLFERS NEED TO PASS A TEST TO BE ALLOWED TO PLAY GOLF WHICH INCLUDES A SECTION ON ETIQUETTE AND COURSE CARE. DO YOU THINK THIS WOULD BE OF BENEFIT IN THE UK?

**YES
91%**

In some countries where golf is relatively new you have to prove you have enough ability and knowledge to take care of the course and not be a danger to yourself and other golfers, but the history and tradition of golf in the UK means this knowledge is usually assumed here, even from beginners. It's clear that many golfers could benefit from brushing up etiquette and course care — you can improve your knowledge at www.randa.org.

How well do golfers repair pitch marks at your facility?

■ Badly **45%** ■ Average **39%** ■ Very badly **12%** ■ Well **4%** ■ Very well **0%**

Greenkeepers believe fewer than half golfers repair pitch marks to an adequate standard. Make sure you always have a pitch mark reparer in your pocket when on the course and ask the pro or greenkeeper if you need guidance on how to properly use it. And remember, just because your ball finished off the green, it doesn't mean it didn't land on it.



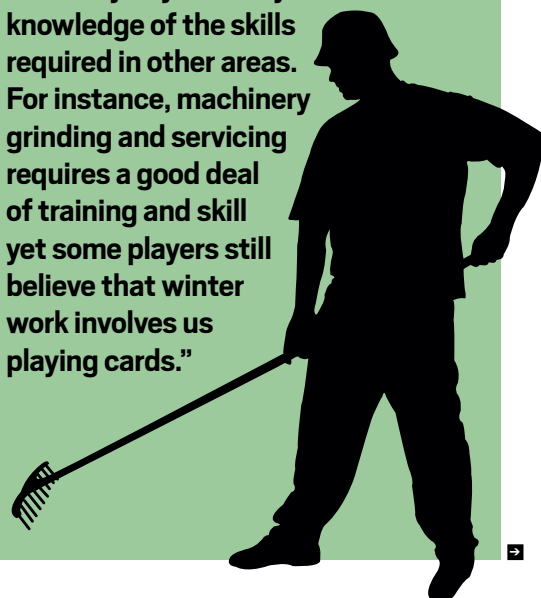
WHAT ARE THE MOST OVERLOOKED ASPECTS OF COURSE CARE?

There are a wide range of areas that greenkeepers feel are overlooked by golfers, from simple things like properly replacing divots and repairing pitch marks, to things the golfer's eye doesn't see such as drainage, machinery maintenance and biological and ecological knowledge. It's obvious that the majority of greenkeepers would be over the moon if all golfers did the simple things like replace their divots, repair their pitch marks and rake bunkers properly when leaving them.

“ Drainage. This includes installing and maintenance. When a course floods members are up in arms but when the flooding stops few committees will spend the right amount of money, the excuse being that it does not happen very often and it is a lot of money. If the committee shows no interest in drainage, staff impact and enthusiasm will be minimal as it can be a very dirty difficult job. ”

“ Pitch marks and fairway divots. After that it would be lack of care in bunker repair after use. ”

“ Members are completely unaware of the work that goes on behind the scenes to maintain a golf course. The high profile work such as mowing and top dressing they see every day but they have no knowledge of the skills required in other areas. For instance, machinery grinding and servicing requires a good deal of training and skill yet some players still believe that winter work involves us playing cards. ”



FORE!

GENERALLY, DO PEOPLE WAIT TO HIT INTO A GREEN YOU'RE WORKING ON?

Usually **78%** Rarely **14%** Always **7%** Never **1%**

The majority of golfers wait for greenkeepers to clear the green but with 15 per cent experiencing this issue on occasion some players still need to think about that. No one should have to worry about being hit by a golf ball on the course, whether working or playing. Just think about how angry you get when you're nearly hit by a ball.

“A golfer would rarely, if ever, play into a green when another golfer is on it, but a greenkeeper cutting or rolling a green or changing a pin position seems to become invisible to them.”

■ Friendly **59%** ■ Average **21%** ■ Very friendly **20%**
■ Very unfriendly **0%** ■ Unfriendly **0%**

Greenkeepers may not think golfers fully understand their role and do as much to help as we could, but they certainly think we're a friendly bunch. Not one greenkeeper taking the survey said golfers were unfriendly so let's maintain that by chatting with greenkeepers when we see them.

HOW FRIENDLY ARE GOLFERS WHEN YOU COME INTO CONTACT WITH THEM?

RESPECT

What could be done to increase the respect golfers have for greenkeepers?

It's clear that the key here is communication and education as this was mentioned in virtually every response. Greenkeepers believe that if golfers know more about what they are doing and why, we would understand the challenges they face and passion and pride they have for producing the best course possible. Ask your greenkeepers what they do. They'd appreciate you taking an interest and you'd benefit from the added knowledge.

"The chance to explain why we do what we do. The club has a plan based on the amount of money we have to spend every year. When golfers watch golf on TV they have no idea how much money and back up that event has had, so they want the same but don't want to pay for it."

"Keep communicating with them. Maybe a documentary on the BBC after The Open showing how they prepare the course, and put across the

fact that not all clubs have the budgets and staff that top courses do."

"Make them do a day's work on the course where they are a member."

"Greenkeepers need to be more professional. The old school approach is not one that has helped our image. We must educate members that cutting the grass is the tip of the iceberg and the skilful part of the job is often not seen or recognised."



The standard of general course care and maintenance is clearly a big annoyance for greenkeepers but there are a few other things that drive them crazy too. Taking trolleys and buggies onto tees and too close to greens, leaving litter on the course, ignoring signs, failure to observe health and safety and general moaning all feature prominently in the survey answers.

■ "Having a moan to the green staff about a subject that is being carried out by direction of the club, which they would have received emails and notices about. When golfers try and bully greenkeepers to change what they are doing for the good of the club."

■ "Playing from the back tees when not playing in a competition."

■ "Taking trolleys and buggies too close to greens and generally not caring for the course."

■ "When golfers don't accept that the course is shut for reasons beyond our control. For example, waterlogged, frozen or snow. We do not do it for our own gratification, it is necessary. It would be far easier just to open it than to have to tell several upset golfers that it's closed, but it's about the bigger picture."

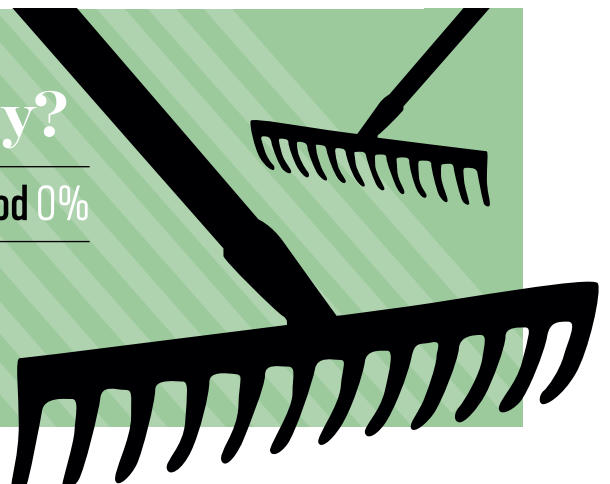
■ "Most golfers want a Rolls Royce, but only want to pay for a Skoda."

What's your pet hate about club golfers?

How good are golfers at raking bunkers at your facility?

Bad 42% Average 38% Very bad 14% Good 6% Very good 0%

More than half of us don't maintain bunkers to the required standard. Having to play from an unraked bunker is one of the most frustrating things in golf and it only takes a minute or two to rake them properly. Remember to leave the rake in an appropriate place so it doesn't affect play and can be easily found by other players, and ask your pro or greenkeepers if you're not sure about how to properly rake a bunker. ▶



What's the funniest/weirdest thing you've seen a player do/say?



■ "A golfer hit a train and then told the driver that he would not have hit it if the train was on time. And someone once mistook a mushroom for the top of his ball. It exploded into bits when he hit it."

■ "A golfer hit two balls into a pond off the 1st tee, then threw his clubs and bag into the pond in frustration. He returned 10 minutes later to retrieve his bag and collect his car keys from inside, before throwing the bag straight back into the pond!"

■ "The funniest thing I've seen was a golfer knocking his tee shot into a bin that was level with the markers. It was a highly-impressive two-yard straight right flop shot with a driver, and it went in without touching the sides."

■ "There was someone who was trying to show off with his remote control trolley and he put it in a pond."

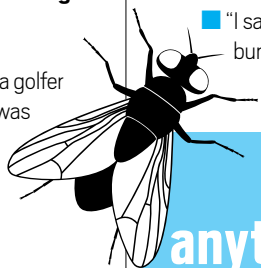
■ "A male golfer walking down a fairway with his pants down because his drive didn't make it past the ladies' tee."

■ "A golfer once asked if we spray the stripes on the green."

■ "We were once asked to remove four new signs from around the putting greens which read 'no chipping onto putting greens' because they didn't say 'please!'"

■ "A member with an injured leg playing a round of golf on a bicycle."

■ "I saw a golfer take a trolley into the bunker and then rake the footprints but not rake the wheel marks once



"Is there anything you can spray to get rid of the flies around the 2nd tee?"

he'd played his shot. He was a bit put out when I pulled him up for it but said he was sorry and played on. A few days later I saw him with his trolley in the bunkers once again. His explanation was that he thought I was upset that he didn't rake out the wheel marks, not that he had the trolley in the bunker!"

■ "A lady golfer at a local club was seen hitting her ball from the turf when fairway mats were in operation (she had been given a mat by the pro shop). The greenkeeper approached and said she must use the mat supplied. He then observed as the lady stood precariously on the mat and hit her next shot off the fairway. You couldn't make it up!"

■ "Two ladies taking their tops off and running through the sprinklers on the green on a hot day (and I have the photo to prove it)."

■ "Once when I was fertilising the tees I heard one golfer ask their playing partner what we were doing. The partner replied, 'they're feeding the birds, that's why we have robins!'"

What's the best conditioned course you've seen in the UK?



More than 40 courses were named in the survey with championship venues and links courses understandably taking the majority of the votes. It seems Scotland has the best greens with Carnoustie, Royal Aberdeen and Loch Lomond leading the standings with six votes each and Turnberry with four. The top English course was Wentworth (four votes) and The Brabazon at The Belfry, Royal Porthcawl, St Andrews, Sunningdale, The Grove and Hankley Common notching three.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO HELP EDUCATE YOUR MEMBERS ON YOUR ROLE AND THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE?

Every greenkeeper who took the survey is making efforts to communicate with their club members, improve knowledge of what they do and keep golfers updated on the course. It's our responsibility to make the most of these opportunities so we can understand their role and take better care of courses ourselves.

"We have monthly members meetings in the clubhouse, a YouTube channel and members can email us and arrange a meeting. We use the bar so it's informal."

"I tried an open day invitation at our workshop and only two people attended – me and my deputy!"

"I communicate all the time. I don't like problems left to fester. If I hear of an issue, big or small, I will resolve it as soon as I can. I talk to members and submit monthly reports."

"We've just started to do a greenkeepers blog so that I can explain any work we do. Before, it was me telling the greens convenor and hoping he understood and then properly communicated it on."