



  
St. Mellion  
Course Manager

# Getting to know ...what your members want

In a bid to answer this fundamental question, Mike Bush MG – Course Manager at St Mellion International Golf Club - quizzed hundreds of the club's members, and the results are helping to shape his future strategy

**St Mellion's Player Survey has highlighted that course condition is a key priority for members – and it's also provided some key pointers regarding turf management practices and priorities in the future for Mike.**

Presenting the results at BIGGA's Devon & Cornwall Spring Seminar, held at the Club, Mike identified that the condition of greens was consistently the most important factor for members across the Club's two 18-hole courses - the Kernow - designed primarily as a resort golf course - and the original championship Nicklaus Signature Course.

The condition of fairways and tees were also of very high importance, although tees were of slightly less importance to lower handicap players on the Nicklaus Course.

Design and aesthetics of the playing environment were also ranked as highly important.

"Pleasingly for the greenkeeping team, the satisfaction with the condition of most aspects of the playing surfaces was high, especially the greens and fairways," reported Mike. "However, the slightly lower satisfaction of the tee conditions has indicated we will need to focus more on those areas to bring them up to the same high level as the rest of the course."

He added that the price of membership was listed as the second most important factor on both courses. "It is a factor that had to be acknowledged in the current economic climate. We have to manage our costs more effectively to ensure our membership price remains competitive, and to recognise that we don't have a blank cheque to

spend on areas that won't give members a valued return."

The Survey was developed and tailored to the Club's specific needs by Syngenta, based on a previous survey which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

#### **Managing to players' demands**

The survey did throw up some fascinating differences between the Club's two courses and the golfers that play them. Mike says the results could now help the team tailor management of the two courses more effectively to cater for the different players' average abilities and meet required criteria of levels of importance.

On the Kernow course, which is predominantly played by golfers with relatively high handicaps, the

key factor for fairway playability was to have the ball sitting proudly on the turf surface, with tight mown turf far less important. On the Nicklaus Course, however, where the majority of players surveyed had a handicap of less than 15, tightly mown fairways were rated as far more crucial. "That has implications for height and frequency of cut and other practices that we can use to help present the sort of playing surfaces that better meet the different demands of players," he added.

Ironically, all the players rated a dense fairway sward of low importance, yet that is the very feature that delivers the ball sitting proudly as they wanted. Mike believes this highlighted the need to phrase any survey questions in a way that players would understand and around the features they are looking for.

### Smooth greens

Another fascinating finding for Mike and the team was the fact responses to questions about the greens identified overwhelming demand for smooth and even paced greens, with fast ball roll lower than the ranking for greens conditions.

"That goes against the typical car park comments and the frequent calls we hear for the need for speed. This now gives us evidence to discuss with members what they really want, and explain what we are doing to deliver it.

"It doesn't mean that we will slow greens down - since smooth consistent surfaces will almost always be quick - but does change the emphasis of what we are looking to achieve with cutting heights and management for dense, smooth surfaces."

### Rough challenge

Across the courses there were adverse comments about the density of the rough, which the team are going to work to address over coming seasons.

Mike says: "It may be that we have made the rough just too challenging for players, to the point that it's spoiling their game.

"With relatively low scores for satisfaction in aspects such as finding their ball and the ability to play out of the rough, we clearly need to look at ways to open out the rough and encourage a higher proportion of finer, wispy grasses.

It shifts the balance between what we see as providing a golfing challenge and defining aesthetically pleasing hole designs using the rough, with the need to maintain playability and enjoyment."

If you would be interested in running a similar Player Survey on your course, please log on to GreenCast - [www.greencast.co.uk](http://www.greencast.co.uk) - and follow the link to send an email to register your interest.

BELOW: Delegates at BIGGA's Devon and Cornwall Spring Seminar



The St Mellion Player Survey was developed and tailored to the Club's specific needs by Syngenta, based on the company's original Golf Player Survey, which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

The findings from the 260 St Mellion members who took part in the on-line questionnaire over the early part of 2013 were remarkably consistent, but added a level of detail to enable Mike Bush to consider future actions. Read the full report on the GreenCast website.

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Mike and his team had already been trialling the use of Rescue to remove coarse grasses in the rough and leave desirable finer fescue species, in an effort to reduce time players spend looking for balls and to speed up play – which was a key area of dissatisfaction for some players.

### Mowing matters

The beautifully presented courses at St Mellion come at a cost of time and effort to hand cut greens, tees and approaches. The fairways are carefully striped and clippings boxed throughout the playing season.

It's an attention to detail that gives Mike and the greenkeeping team immense pride, but the survey revealed this is largely overlooked by players. More surprisingly, players seemed totally unconcerned about striped and well defined fairways.

"That raises questions about how we manage mowing in the future, which might possibly release time and budget to spend in other areas." However, he will raise these questions with members before introducing changes and may repeat the survey to check responses.

"It would also appear that they are unconcerned that the greens are cut with pedestrian mowers – it came bottom in importance among the Kernow respondents and very low for players on the Nicklaus. However, they both rated smooth ball roll and even pace as crucial – which are both enhanced by the accuracy of pedestrian cutting. That mean we possibly need to better explain the link between our greenkeeping activities and the resulting playing quality, so I feel the question's terminology may have been misunderstood."

### Ageing golfers

Mike acknowledged that the survey highlighted the issue of an ageing of golf population, especially in the South West region where there is a higher proportion of retired players. More than 70% of respondents on both courses were over 50 years old, with around 45% more than 66.

"We know that we need to be doing more to attract a new, younger generation of golfers to the game; having greater feedback from them would possibly enable us to do more to meet their demands – whether that be in specific playing conditions, or a game format they would want to participate in more."

The survey did positively identify that an internet-based questionnaire could reach the older genera-

tion, but it may be that a survey for younger players needs to feature fewer, shorter questions directly related to topics that may interest them, which they could answer quickly. It could also be placed on Twitter or Facebook to encourage greater participation.

### Attractive proposition

The survey also looked at what specific factors attracted players to a different course – providing a valuable insight into what might tempt members away, as well as elements that could be enhanced to bring in new players.

The design of the golf course unanimously came out as the top factor that attracted them to a course, followed by the aesthetics of the course and the quality of greens. Turf quality on the rest of the course, along with a friendly atmosphere in the club, ranked lower.

Mike believed these results demonstrated that investment in new features on the course and improving the quality of playing surfaces was always going to prove a key factor in attracting new players, as well as maintaining the interest and satisfaction of existing members.

### Justifying investment

Mike added the results could prove valuable in helping to justify investment and expenditure in key areas of the course where they now know that members will welcome improvements.

"We have been looking to do further work on the drainage across the course to improve year-round playability, which was really put to the test last year.

"The fact that members have identified this as an area of low satisfaction adds weight to the need for action. I am keen to do more to further improve the tees, which again we know is an area to prioritise with a re-leveling and drainage programme.

"General Managers and Directors all love data and make their business decisions based on stats. We now have a wealth of valid information to influence what we do and why.

"It also gives us greater opportunity to discuss issues with members and to demonstrate what we are doing for their benefit.

"We now have a benchmark on players' needs and satisfaction with the Club and the courses, which we could refine and repeat in the future to ensure we are preempting changing demands and meeting what the players want."