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SUSTAINABILITY – THE WAY TO GO

By James Blacklock

I find myself writing this article to address several viewpoints, most likely the source of many arguments and debates among the greenkeeping industry! However, these can only be positive points for discussion. Steve Isaac, at the R&A, encouraged me to submit this article to Greenkeeper International. It is his hope and mine that greenkeepers take the initiative and move down the ‘sustainable road’ for the future benefit of all involved. The R&A can use its vast resources to school us to the benefits of a ‘sustainable’ future, but it is up to us the custodians of our courses to take the initiative.

I am in what I like to call the ‘second generation’ in the sustainability debate. I am the Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere Golf Club, in Worsley, Manchester. I am closing in on one year ‘in the deep end’ of my new employment as previously, until February of this year, I worked at Lymm Golf Club under the tutorage of Stuart Yarwood – the founder member of the Gingerbread men! For the past six or so years we headed down the highly controversial ‘sustainability’ route. Although I’m not entirely blessed with the exact date the term ‘sustainability’ came into existence, we were, at Lymm G.C already practising this philosophy when it first became a widespread topic of discussion.

At the time of leaving for my new venture I witnessed at first hand a typical parkland course turn from a wet, thatch ridden haven for poa

annua, into an excellent, well draining, firm, dry course blessed with thriving populations of the finer fescue and bent species – especially on the greens.

Even though our approach to course management may not have been known at the time as what we now call sustainability, we were moving along that line and following the ‘Jim Arthur’ approach. I remember well the first three years or so when thatch removal and drainage improvements were the main priorities. This was a time when relaxing disturbance pressures on the greens were not the way to go! Commonplace was intensive coring and deep scarification on the greens. Every winter thereafter showed signs of drainage improvements. This, combined with selective green reconstructions and piped drainage introduced to problem greens, created an environment starting to favour the finer species. It was evident that natural bents and even fescue colonies were becoming well established.

During the last few years these finer species were also introduced via seed. This was only possible after the thatch had been all but eliminated. When we started to introduce seed to the greens, we were at the point where coring would only remove the more desirable species. We were also reducing the fertiliser and irrigation inputs annually. This really needs to be done gradually over a few years. Greens fed and watered too much are like drug addicts. They need to be weaned off slowly.

The situation I found myself in at Ellesmere was that my predecessor had left me with greens that had virtually no thatch and an excellent depth of topdressing over the years as root zone. I noticed there were natural colonies of bents especially, and a good percentage of fescue grasses. Fertiliser and irrigation inputs had been reduced over the past couple of years. The environment was perfect to use my first year as what I call a further step up the sustainability ladder. It was time to stop coring because thatch was under control, and to start introducing fescue and bent seed. Top dressing frequency was increased to every two weeks when the weather allowed during the spring and summer months. Wetting agents were applied monthly and surfaces stayed firm and dry even through the wet summer. Areas of longer rough were introduced and left to grow over the summer months before being cut down and collected late 'summer/early' autumn. The course had a very natural appearance.

I'm not saying all was rosy in the garden. I had a section of the membership who didn't take too kindly to their golf balls being swallowed up by long rough hit 50 yards off line! Some members were not impressed that during the warm dry spell in April last season, I didn't pile the water on to keep the greens soft and bright green. I resisted pressure to follow the 'green is great' notion, and noted

the annual meadow grass yellowing and showing signs of stress. I continued my policy throughout the summer and only occasional watering – mainly by hand, had a positive effect. I do think that these periods of stress levied from the irrigation systems are very effective when timed prior to over seeding on the greens. This appears to give the seedlings more of a competitive edge and chance to establish themselves at the expense of the poa.

At the Captain's dinner the Captain said the greens were the best they had been in 50 years. I might add he also wasn't too impressed by 'all the long rough this year'! I come to the conclusion that you can't win them all! I do feel, however, that it is very important for the Head Greenkeeper/Course Manager to be very strong in 'his/her' convictions. I believe if you stick to your guns and continue with what you know is best – even in the face of disapproval from sections of the membership and committees, you will emerge with a better and more sustainable golf course. I must stress though that you must communicate with the membership and committees as to what your motives are. Every golf club has a few hundred greenkeepers, each with differing opinions who think they can do a better job. With their knowledge of working in offices and business so to speak they are obviously not experts in agronomy. Even though you know that what



you are doing is right you must never lose sight of the fact that it is the members' golf course, and sometimes you have to compromise and educate them to make progress.

I think the common misconception among the greenkeeping industry, is that moving along the sustainability route will in the short term produce a downturn in the quality of playing surfaces. This is not the case as long as the greenkeeper in charge doesn't try to bite off more than he can chew. If a well-formulated 'Course Management Policy Document' is followed over several years, the greens will show signs of improvements year after year. Softly softly, gently gently and above all patience is the answer. Changes don't happen overnight and in reality it will take a couple of years to even create the right conditions to move forward. The basic fundamentals of thatch control and drainage improvements must be tackled first. If done right, this will lead to better more consistent putting surfaces.

I consider myself to be quite fortunate, as I have experienced several different approaches and philosophies towards golf course management. I completed my HND education at Muserscough College under the stewardship of Martyn Jones. A more knowledgeable man you will never meet. I worked for a year in Florida, building, growing in and subsequently maintaining a multimillion-dollar 'championship' golf course.

Every golf course is different and every situation unique in its own right. Every club's level of sustainability is different. I find myself

now, trying to keep fertiliser, irrigation and chemical applications to an absolute minimum, yet during my time in America I can remember fertilising wall-to-wall (the whole golf course!) on several occasions with complete fertilisers. Can you imagine it – fertilising the rough! Irrigation was complete coverage across the whole course and usually daily. We had a full time spray technician who just seemed to spray all day everyday – even at night! I recall in the recent STRI bulletin the agronomist Megan Hood commenting on how in the New Zealand Open in 2005 back up measures were in place artificially to green up the fairways if they weren't green enough for the tournament.

Our level of sustainability in our temperate climate is clearly different from other climatic zones. Yet we have a duty to the environment and ourselves, to make life easier. How can it not be better and easier to apply less fertiliser, less irrigation and fewer chemicals? The knock on effect on the workload is also evident. A higher percentage of finer grasses mean less coring, less verticutting and fewer disturbances as a whole. This extra time saving can be put to use elsewhere, e.g. hand mowing greens more during the summer. It seems silly not to move along this route.

The final point I make is do you have the resources to move forward? I found myself very limited in terms of available machinery and resources. Almost all work over the previous years had been done by hiring in people to do jobs such as verti draining, coring, spiking etc. After much discussion and examination of previous working methods the council agreed to completely overhaul our inventory of machines and add new items such as a new spin top dresser (with which I can top dress the greens and drag them in myself in half a day), a pro core machine (with which I will use a variety of narrow solid tines as frequently as possible next season), two new hand mowers and several other machines replacing older and possibly unreliable ones.

Part of my philosophy is to hand mow the greens as often as possible during the summer, and exclusively from Mid September to May. Heights of cuts are rarely below 5mm during the summer and 7.5mm during the winter. I have five full time staff – which I keep very fit with lots of hand mowing!

I can already hear lots of Course Managers muttering 'It will never work at my golf course.' Well the answer is simple. What are you going to do when the inevitable cutback in pesticide regulations lead to either a partial or total ban on spraying chemicals on our treasured courses? This has already started to happen across Europe. Is the membership going to be happy when on the day of the Club Championship they arrive to see their greens decimated by fusarium? Will they care that we can no longer combat this disease via fungicide applications? We must make a move to promoting the sustainable approach before it's too late. The buck stops with us the greenkeepers. We must take the initiative. We are aware of probable future changes in regulation, and if we don't act now, then we will have no one to blame but ourselves. We must not let our own ignorance be an excuse. One hundred years ago greenkeepers managed to produce the kind of fine grass dominated surfaces that we strive for, so why can't we? As a result they didn't have the disease problems we have today. Although to be fair the level of play on the courses was far less than today. I welcome debate on this issue, which can only be good for the industry.

I find it fascinating how the industry as a whole evolves and I will stick to my beliefs. I would like to commend the R&A and BIGGA for championing the sustainability cause and putting the message out there via the best course for golf website and the Greenkeeper International magazine.

James Blacklock is Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere Golf Club.



James Blacklock, Head Greenkeeper at Ellesmere



James Blacklock, with Deputy Chris Shorten

INFECTIONS AS WORK

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INFECTIONS AT WORK

Those working in the outdoor leisure sector have a slightly increased risk of contracting specific infections than the general population due to the nature of their work. Infection organisms can be transferred via several routes:

- Inhaled as spores or droplets
- Through the skin via cuts and abrasions
- Splashes to the eyes, nose and mouth of infected liquids
- Ingested through contaminated hands or foodstuff
- Bites from insects

The likely infections to be aware of: Weil's Disease (Leptospirosis) - Is mainly caused by coming into contact with water in ditches, ponds and slow moving rivers, or streams that are contaminated with rat urine, other sources are grain and seeds that rats may have fed on. Infection arises through the bacteria entering the body through cuts and abrasions in the skin or droplets and splashes to the eyes, mouth and linings of the nose.

Infection can be prevented by always washing your hands before eating, drinking or smoking. Cuts and abrasions should always be covered with waterproof dressings and, if you are immersed in potentially contaminated water, waterproof protective clothing should be worn. Gloves should be worn or tongs used to handle dead rodents.

LYME DISEASE - Is contracted by bites from infected ticks. The ticks feed and breed on animals but can be deposited on vegetation in woodland or heaths. People entering these areas may come into contact with the tick which can attach itself to skin. Early signs of a bite and infection can be a rash, which should be medically examined. The risk of infection can be reduced by:

- being aware of ticks, and which areas they normally live in,
- wearing appropriate clothing in tick infested areas
- using insect repellents, •inspecting your skin for ticks, especially at the end of the day - include your head, neck and skin folds (armpits, groin, and waistband),

If a tick is found on the skin, it should be removed by gently gripping it as close to the skin as possible, preferably using fine toothed tweezers, and pulled steadily away. It is essential that the head and mouth parts are removed otherwise it may only remove the tick body leaving the possibility of infection from the mouth. Some veterinary surgeries and pet shops sell inexpensive tick removal devices.

The initial symptoms of both Weil's and Lyme disease are flu like. Both are treatable in the early stages with antibiotics. Outdoor workers should alert their GP to the nature of their occupation to ensure that these diseases are taken into account.

TETANUS - Is caused by the tetanus bacterium getting into the body via a wound such as a cut or animal bite. The risk of the disease is greater where the wound is deep or gets dirty with organic matter. However, even small wounds such as thorn pricks can introduce enough bacteria to cause infection. Protection against tetanus is achieved by immunisation. Five doses of the vaccine are required to give life long immunity. Normally, every child in the UK is immunised in childhood. Booster injections are required every 10 years for those who haven't had the full five doses. Even where the vaccine has been given, medical advice should be sought where wounds are deep, badly soiled or extensive flesh damage has been sustained.

Outdoor workers should ensure that they have had the requisite number of vaccinations.

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Hobbies

Here's something you didn't know about me...

Name: Fliss Chaffer

Hobby: Playing the Saxophone

Job: Sales Executive at BIGGA HQ

How and when did you take up playing the Saxophone?

"Always having had a long term desire to play the Saxophone, a very thoughtful friend bought me an Alto Sax for my 40th. Next thing was to endeavour to blow a note! Not the easiest of instruments to learn. I was fortunate enough to find a marvellous tutor, charismatic, bordering on wacky and have never looked back! I just play for pleasure, not working towards any grades.

"I enjoy playing Salsa, Latin American, Jazz, Blues and Soul music. After some time, my tutor told me I was tall enough and ugly enough to progress to the Tenor Sax – not quite sure if that was a compliment! So I have!"

What is it about playing the Saxophone that appeals to you?

"The Saxophone has a wonderful resonance (when played well!), I find playing to be a great stress relief – although the long-suffering neighbours may not agree!"

Have you played in any concerts?

"I've played in four concerts so far (I'm currently taking bookings for next year!) and a lot of rehearsing is required. The learning and practising process is very much like being back at school, and I've had a few detentions for being sluggish on the rehearsals!"



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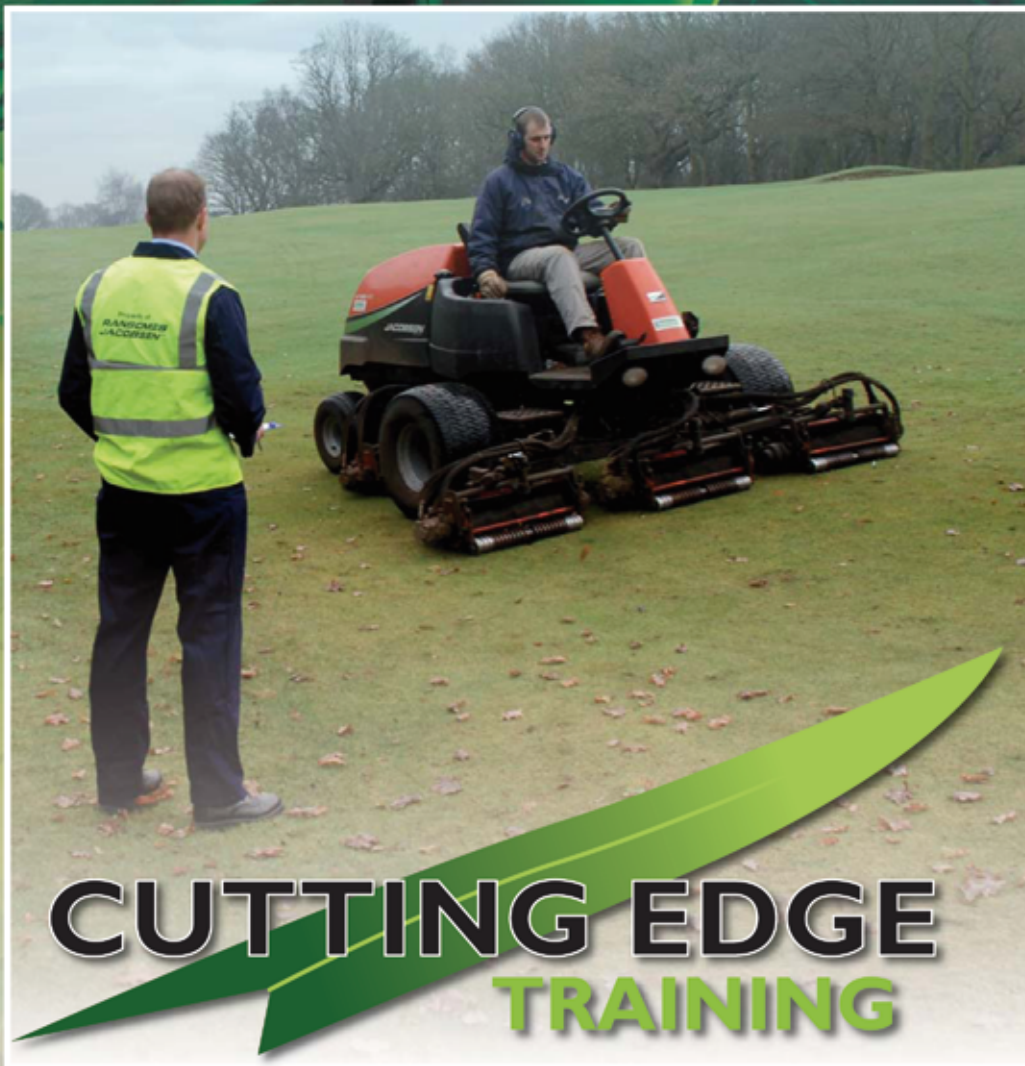


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WORKSHOP ORGANISATION

In this special supplement GI takes a look at the training a mechanic goes through, what it takes to set up a workshop and how to ensure it runs smoothly





Cal's technicians at Celtic Manor

MANAGING MECHANICS

Melissa Toombs asked Workshop Manager, Patrick Callaby, just what it takes to set up a workshop...

Patrick Callaby, or Cal as he is more fondly known, is Workshop Manager at Celtic Manor Resort. Supported by three technicians - one of Cal's team is a trainee at Evesham College and the other two are graduates from there.

Cal started out in the industry at St Pierre Golf & Country Club, at Chepstow, where he remained for eight years before moving to Celtic Manor in 1994 - just as the golf courses were being built. He has been working as a mechanic for around 40 years, studying full time for six months and taking evening classes for five years. Cal has been working in golf industry for 22 years and is an Associate Member of both the Institute of the Motor Industry and the Institute of Vehicle Recovery.

What would a mechanic require to run a small workshop, a medium sized workshop and an all singing, all dancing workshop?

"A small workshop is generally created with a small budget in mind. A few tools and some space set aside to work on machines on wet days when work on the course is not possible. "Created" is possibly not the right word for such a set-up more like "evolved", it's happened almost by accident. Nothing wrong with that, not all clubs need more than that and view it as a cost saving.

"A medium workshop for say, 27 to 36 holes takes considerably more

money to set up and a lot more thought. The skills of the person working there will dictate the level of equipment to be purchased therefore it will also have a bearing on the money required initially. As the skills of the mechanic develop then the equipment level will rise and must be viewed almost as a work in progress. Will the budget run too grinding machinery? Again it depends on the person employed, how much work is generated, the general age of the machinery and its condition, the level of care and presentation of the golf course and whether there is an exchange program in place, also how far away the local dealership is. All these things need to be considered, after all it's pointless buying a mig welder if the mechanic can't weld for instance.

"A large workshop is usually purpose built and incorporated inside the main building. Often with heating, good lighting, good access from outside and inside, airy and spacious, if these things are in place we need only address the equipment level.

"More than 36 holes would justify a large workshop and more than justify an "in house" grinding set-up. This is where costs go up considerably, quality grinders for both cylinders and bedknives will cost between £18,000 and £23,000 depending on manufacturer and specification.

"Justification for this outlay is a subject on its own and I won't go into it here. Gas and electric welding equipment, a machine lift, tyre changing machine, jacks/stands, bench grinder, angle grinder, electric drill, vice,