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# What every golfer wants

**Understanding exactly what attracts players to a course is essential for greenkeepers and club managers to prioritise their efforts in enhancing the golfers' playing experience.**

**The Syngenta Golf Player Survey has sought to identify what players actually want, reports the Syngenta Turf Business Development Manager, Rod Burke**

**Golf players say focus on turf quality. Enhancing the playing experience is crucial to attracting and retaining payers at golf courses, thus ensuring the financial sustainability of the club. With golf clubs under intense economic pressure and the increasing trend for 'nomadic' golfers to move between clubs and courses, it's more important than ever to find out what they really want. Attracting membership, visitors and 'pay and play' golfers is critical to the economic success of any golf course.**

Syngenta commissioned international independent market research specialist, Gfk Kynetec, to survey over 300 golfers from clubs across the UK, to find out what aspects of turf and club management are most important

to them and, importantly, how satisfied they are with existing practices on their clubs.

The results have clearly reinforced the essential need for clubs to focus on turf playing quality - and most specifically greens - as the most important factor for players, along with offering a fascinating insight into some of the areas where greenkeepers can focus their time and investment.

Without exception for course type or skill level of players - the survey separated out members clubs, municipal courses, private businesses and hotels, as well as high and low handicap players - the condition of greens, fairways and tees always appeared in the Top Five factors, and always in that order.

Other elements identified were the design of the course,

which was the second most important factor for players with a low handicap (<10), but less important for those of higher handicaps. Inevitably the price of membership or green fee was also high on the list, but rated of more importance among the high handicappers, compared to low handicap players. Price was most important for players who play most often at municipal or private clubs.

The survey also revealed that elements that could be grouped as 'clubhouse services' - elements such as food and beverage, shop facilities, practice areas and buggy availability - all scored of the lowest importance in the factors questioned.

For greenkeepers it is a powerful argument to ensure that clubs continue to invest in their turf, if they are to attract new players.



Out on the course, it will come as no surprise that the quality of the greens is clearly of paramount importance and most critically appraised by players. But, interestingly, there was generally better satisfaction with the condition of greens, compared to condition of fairways, tees and, to an even greater extent, rough.

With green performance, the players rated smooth ball roll as the most important factor, with 92% of players questioned scoring it 7/10 or more. Of the 12 questions asked which addressed playability, fast ball roll - which is frequently quoted as the Holy Grail for greenkeepers - actually scored lowest with players, including both high and low handicaps.

Some other aspects of greens management where players prioritise importance include (in order), freedom from weeds; free of scars or disease; a firm playing surface and consistent pace between greens. Turf density was seen as significantly more important at members, private and, especially, hotel, courses, compared to town or municipal clubs.

Greens free of brown dry patch areas was also highly desirable, with 50% of players rating it of the highest importance (>9/10). However, it was this issue that gave rise

to the greatest levels of dissatisfaction with current performance of greens management, with less than 30% very satisfied.

The lower levels of satisfaction among players in fairway condition indicates clubs that can provide higher quality stand to get the best results in attracting new players. The most important factor which players of all standards want is for the ball to sit proud on the turf, along with even and consistent grass height and cover. Again the presence of dry, or drought affected areas, gave rise to the highest levels of dissatisfaction, along with levels of divots, scars and bare patches.

Tackling thin or bare patches is also of the highest priority for players for management of tees; over a third of players were not satisfied with the level of divots and scars.

However, turf colour and having turf stripes and clearly defined on tees is of much lower importance.

In rough areas, the survey has shown that the ability to find a ball easily is highly important, which links to one of the players' major gripes around the speed of play. Rough that appears managed and even is of the highest importance - with the desire for fine wispy grass species and not thick and tangled, highlighted.

However, with around half of all

players reporting not being satisfied with current rough management, it highlighted that these desires are not typically being met.

Outside of the actual playing area, the survey showed that a course that looks natural is the most important environmental aspect. For over 70% of players, being able frequently to observe birds and wildlife is highly important, with a similar number supporting environmental initiatives at

**With green performance, the players rated smooth ball roll as the most important factor, with 92% of players questioned scoring it 7/10 or more**

the course as highly important.

Indeed, the aesthetics and environment of the course is second only to its design as the prime factor most likely to attract new players.

This survey, the first of its kind identifying player desires and satisfaction in such detail, provides a wealth of information to enable greenkeepers and club managers find a way to enhance the playing experience, with the potential to attract more players to their clubs.

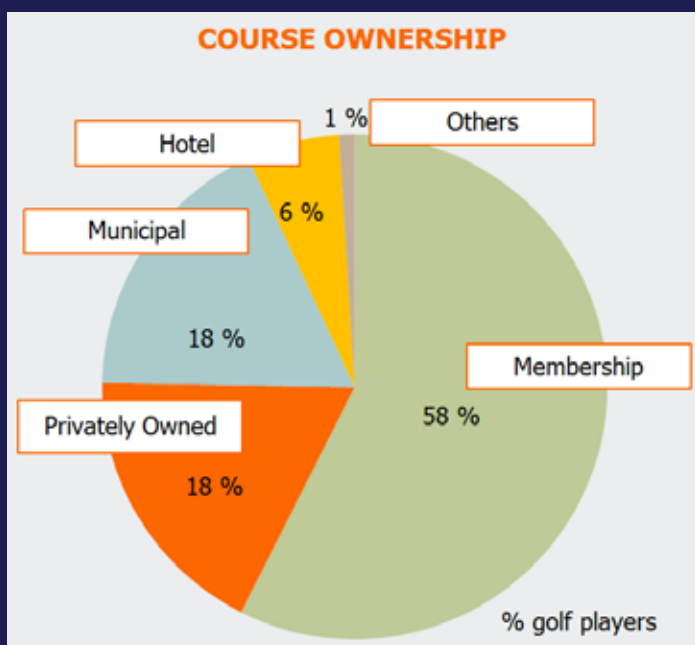
## Syngenta Golf Player Survey – who and what was asked?

- Broad section of golf players, course types and handicaps
- Assessing factors that influence the playing experience: turf quality; environment and club facilities
- All areas of the course
- Satisfaction levels with current course performance?
- What attracts golfers to new courses?
- 305 golfers
- Nationwide survey:

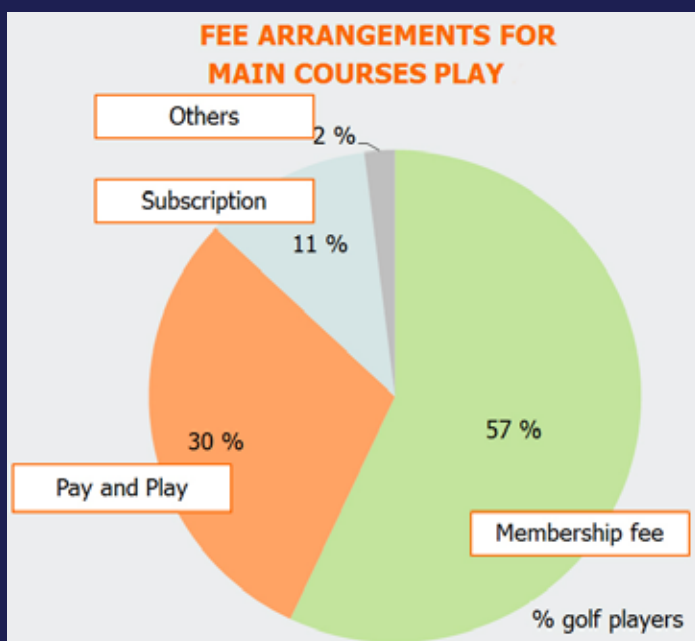
Scotland ..... 17%.....North of England ....18%  
 Midlands .... 18%.....Easter counties.....15%  
 South East . 14%.....South West .....7%  
 Wales ..... 6%.....Northern Ireland.....4%

- All ages: < 35 - 13%; 36-50 - 32%; >50 - 54%
- Main course holes: 18 holes - 81%; 27 holes - 7%; 36 holes - 5%; others - 7%

### COURSE OWNERSHIP



### FEE ARRANGEMENTS FOR MAIN COURSES PLAY



Survey source: GfK Kynetec: Study of golf player perceptions, satisfaction and desires for golf course management; 305 golfers; January 2012

### Syngenta Golf Player Summary – Fairways

- Ball lie is the most important factor for fairway performance
- Players are significantly less satisfied with fairway condition, compared to greens
- Even and consistent turf height a highly important factor; but only 64% satisfaction rating
- Over 40% not satisfied with levels of scars, bare patches and divots
- Brown and drought stressed areas give the highest levels of dissatisfaction

### Syngenta Golf Player Summary – Greens

- Greens condition is players' Number 1 factor in judging a course
- Smooth ball roll is the most important factor
- Fast ball roll is the least important factor surveyed
- Only one third of players are 'very satisfied' with the condition of greens; 40% 'quite satisfied'
- Greens free of weeds and disease or scars is the second most important factor for players
- Dry brown patches give the highest levels of dissatisfaction in greens condition

### Syngenta Golf Player Summary – Out-of-play rough

- A natural looking course is most important to players
- Aesthetics and environment of the course is second only to its design to attract visiting players – more important than quality of greens and turf
- Three quarters of players rate viewing birds and wildlife as high importance
- 70% of players want to see environmental initiatives on the course
- Turf quality and condition on the playing part of the course far exceeds importance of other factors

### Syngenta Golf Player Summary – Tees

- Tee condition is the turf area of greatest dissatisfaction among players
- Avoiding thin or bare patches is of the greatest importance for players
- 40% of players are not satisfied with levels of bare patches, divots and scars
- Half of players are not satisfied with dry patch and areas affected by drought on tees
- Turf stripes and definition is of least importance on tees

### Syngenta Golf Player Summary – In-play rough

- Over half of players are not satisfied with most aspects of rough management
- Managed and even rough is the most important factor
- Ball location and playability is the second factor – Speed of play is a major issue
- Players want fine wispy grass species, not thick tangled rough

# A first for Bulgaria



BIGGA member, Jordan Fairweather, describes his time working in one of the world's newer golfing destinations





**“ Bulgaria is a relatively new country to the game of golf but in 2011 it has taken further steps in recognising itself as a golf destination.**

The country has recently been awarded the 2012 “Undiscovered Golf Destination of The Year” by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators and now has six 18-hole facilities open, offering two Gary Player Signature designs, a Peter Harradine, a Paul McGinley and two Ian Woosnam’s, all excellent facilities with teaching academy’s, residential apartments, hotels and spa resorts. Pravets Golf Club is the first to offer a fully flood light range and short game area.

Back in April, 2010, the then soon-to-be opened Pravets Golf Club, designed by Peter Harradine and managed by Braemar Golf of St Andrews, was awarded the “PGA Professionals championship of Europe” by the PGAs of Europe, to be staged annually for three years from last September. This would not only be a return of a tourna-

full six months earlier than ideally preferred. Due to the geographical location of Pravets the weather changes dramatically and temperatures will rise from 3 degrees to 18 degrees in little over 10 days and will never drop below that until autumn. Summer temperatures rise to approx 36 degrees Celsius, coupled with high humidity, and during 2010, I had witnessed all kinds of disease on the turf from Dollar Spot, Pythium, Take All and Fusarium in a six week period.

Warm season grasses would grow here for three to four months with this climate. Pravets is the first golf course to be seeded with traditional fescue bent in Bulgaria rather than creeping bents found on all other courses. When specifications for the course were drawn up, long term management costs had to be considered.

With a country which only has 250 registered golfers grass varieties were chosen with keeping agronomic inputs and in turn costs manageable. If the choice had been to use creeping bent with rye grass roughs, maintenance costs would

**“With a country which only has 250 registered golfers grass varieties were chosen with keeping agronomic inputs and in turn costs manageable. If the choice had been to use creeping bent with rye grass roughs, maintenance costs would be significantly higher”**

ment to the yearly calendar after a six year absence but the first professional tournament to be held in Bulgaria.

The final fairway and greens at Pravets were seeded in September 2010 with construction completed on December 11, and snow fall then covering the course from December 14 until early March. Grow-in of the last fairways had to be quick before temperatures fell, so a quick release ammonium nitrate product was sourced from local agriculture. Fairways were sand capped but suffered from erosion damage before being handed over to the maintenance team.

With limited supply of fungicide available in Bulgaria we managed to get together enough to apply Azoxystrobin to all surfaces prior to snowfall. When snow melted all surfaces were 100% free of disease and the first goal was to be ready for a grand opening on May 15 by the Bulgarian Prime minister, a

be significantly higher.

With a greenkeeping team of 19, of whom 50% speak English, we worked towards opening. This was a task which was problematic due to four greens receiving major contamination from erosion of soil and clay before being handed over to us by the contractor along with some fairways, and also lack of access roads and infrastructure hindering us until mid July did not make it easy. A total of 1025 tonnes of sand was spread on the course in conjunction with needle tinning and hollow-coring to smooth out surfaces and remove soil contamination. Always In the back of our minds was the tournament in September and if we had not committed to the grand opening in May we probably would have re-laid four greens and three fairways.

One thing we are very fortunate is our client, Terra Tour Services, wishes to see its golf course at the same level as their hotels, all luxury



4 star resorts. Due to this TTS signed a deal with Toro, a partner of Braemar Golf, for the biggest fleet of Toro equipment in Eastern Europe along with a state of the art maintenance facility.

With grow-in near complete and the golf course open six months earlier than we would have liked we turned our minds to an agronomic programme to, not just suit our fescue turf, but to cope with the unknown stresses of the site.

With no history of the site we have dealt with outbreaks of which at the time were unknown grasses germinating which had been in the native soil below the sand cap and worked their way up due to rotovating of the surfaces before sand spread, a lesson learnt for future construction!

Common Bermuda grass encroachment from adjacent land, which thrives in our summer tried to invade; the need for golf carts on a relatively new sward in 35 degree heat has been a big stress but, with the revenue they provide, it is not something we can ban.

Changing roller types and HOC on certain fairways and greens, a combination of hand watering and day watering being required to micro manage situations which were not only dealing with daily

stresses but still at a growing in stage.

With September approaching, and the greens and fairways now near a year old and having matured to the comfortable stage, we moved into more education.

After having introduced the locally recruited staff to the nature of golf course management in the matter of months we moved on to furthering their knowledge by introducing them to tournament preparation.

The "PGA Professionals Championship of Europe" event was to be filmed by Golfing World TV and shown to a TV audience of 350 million including 18 international in-flight entertainment TV, along with social media networks. We had been monitoring our fertility and pesticide programmes and after we were comfortable with the micro management of the grow-in we then started to tailor this to achieve consistency throughout surfaces.

One thing professional golfers want is consistency, not colour and not always speed, but consistency. The PGA's of Europe use the same set of agronomy guidelines as the European Tour so the standard was to be the same as you would expect to find on any Tour event.

Green speed has never been a



LEFT: Winner: Hugo Santos  
ABOVE: 9th and 18th at the ceremony



Jordan Fairweather has been working in the greenkeeping industry for 14 years. Originally from Scotland where he spent seven years at Loch Lomond Golf Club while working on 11 European Tour events. Working at the 2007 US Open at Oakmont Country Club and 2008 Ryder Cup at Valhalla Golf Club he then moved to the Middle East- Dubai, and Abu Dhabi saw him take the position of Construction Superintendent.



concern of mine for our members as with average 30 degree heat and only 18 days of rain from June through September our fescue greens were more than quick enough.

The PGA's of Europe asked us to set them at 10-10.5, which was not far off daily speeds. In the lead up to the tournament we were single cutting at 3.6mm and grooming at 3mm twice weekly. On the first day's practice we followed up a single cut with a roll using salsco greens irons and with the mid afternoon temp around 28 the greens were stimping at 11.2 - 11.4 so the rollers were only used once later that week.

Instead we preferred to cut morning and evening. The fescue bent mix was never really stressed through the week and received only some hand watering in the evenings. I had my reservations as to whether the fescue being the dominant grass would cope in a country where we would deal with temps over 30 all summer.

With a client's expectations for a green, aesthetically pleasing course while maintaining the firm surfaces with speeds required for an event like ours, but it has been excellent

and shows that with preventative stress measures and still with very little fertility input it can be done.

Here at Pravets we tissue test every six weeks and base our foliar and drench applications of fertility around this. We mix up our own fertiliser on site which not only allows us to tailor the needs of the plant exactly what it wants when it wants but actually reduces our fertiliser costs and wastage. We have found this essential this year to deal with our surfaces where leaching is very high with higher irrigation water usage.

Fertilisers like potash, calcium, manganese and magnesium are very easy to source here in Bulgaria due to the large agricultural produce of cucumbers, tomatoes etc so helps us greatly. Environmental Turf Technology, in the UK, is very helpful in not only helping us source and what we cannot source locally but helping us to analyse the makeup of certain fertilisers available in Bulgaria.

Controlled release fertilisers have to be imported from the UK, Germany and Holland and sometimes transport costs outweigh the fertiliser costs. Due to this the only granular application we applied

after the grow-in phase to tees and greens was a controlled release potassium nitrate in the autumn, which we will stick with in 2012.

Working abroad always brings new challenges and you either have a bug for it or you don't. There are many great opportunities for greenkeepers out there in the market, you just need to find them, as the new countries to Golf and Sports

## Controlled release fertilisers have to be imported from the UK, Germany and Holland and sometimes transport costs outweigh the fertiliser costs

Turf are numerous. The grasses are the same along with the methodology.

I know greenkeepers in Tatarstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, Russia, Morocco and many other countries with few golf courses' or turf surfaces. They all love their job as we do. The willingness to succeed and a love of Turfgrass keep us abroad!

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