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# Golf club politics

Are you frustrated with constant political bickering at your club? Here's David Bancroft-Turner with a realistic and hard-hitting view on how to manage it all



**Golf Club politics - surely there aren't any? Members come together to enjoy and share the game that they all love, hosting old and new friends, eating and drinking at the 19th hole, generally getting along and telling tales of the various shots that were great or not so great...sounds idyllic doesn't it?**

But let's go behind the scenes... Committees populated with the same people year after year, groups formed around various personalities, the member from hell that complains about everything, greenkeeping staff that seem to delight in making it as difficult for members as possible... oh the joys of working at a Golf Club. The frustration, angst, time wasting...argh!

Golf Clubs are like any other formalised groups of human

beings – where there are three or more gathered together, thou shalt have politics. But actually it's worse than that, as Clubs have an added dimension that companies and the like don't have – people who have time on their hands. A group, generally retired, with agendas only known to themselves interacting with the paid service providers within the club who don't have this time luxury, in fact the opposite.

So let's take a step back and get some clarity on what we are talking about here – Club politics. Note the small 'p'. So we are talking about the behaviour of all people associated with the Club, but what actually is 'politics'?

One definition would be the informal way of getting things done, as opposed to the formal. An example - when I was a Committee member and was keen to propose

a new way of doing things I chose to approach all of the other Committee members for their views and ask for their support. When I had that support I attended the Committee meeting to put forward my idea – but I already knew the outcome! The question to you is this – in your opinion was I skilful or manipulative?

View One: You're skilful.

Get others people's views first, tweak your idea as a result of their input and get clarity of direction before you get the official rubber stamp of approval at the meeting.

View Two: You're manipulative.

Why didn't you present your ideas in the open at the meeting where we could all discuss the relative merits, all have a say and then vote on it?

I don't subscribe to the idea that one is good and two is bad (or vice versa) they are just different ways

## about the author



**David Bancroft - Turner**

David Bancroft-Turner has worked with BIGGA for many years, has worked in the area of influencing for 15 years and has presented to some of the world's leading organisations such as NatWest. He is the author of 'Workplace Politics'.

David will be writing another article soon covering information on the four different personality types. If you would like further information and/or support on this article then contact David at [dbt@tafpi.com](mailto:dbt@tafpi.com)

of getting to the same end point. I don't find it helpful to argue which is right and which is wrong. We will just end up arguing. The key question is:

**DO YOU KNOW WHICH ONE IS HAPPENING AT YOUR CLUB?**

In fact - are you aware of how your Club really works? Not how it says it works, but how it REALLY works. This is the art, science and process of managing Club politics. And you know what? If you don't manage the Club politics, they will manage you. And do you know what that means? You will be sidelined, left out of decisions, ignored, your ability to influence reduced, your power to bring about change deflated, and your voice a quiet whisper in the vocal morass that is your Club.

What this means in practice is; depending on how other people go about their business you will need to use different skills and behaviours to make sure you are not a victim of however they go about their decision making.

So - are you convinced yet that you need to be on top of your Club politics?

I wasn't, until something happened to me working in my first job - in a bank (yes, I know, I know, I used to be proud of this until some idiots in pinstripe suits started ruining the whole industry. Anyway, back to the story). My good friend Neil and I had joined the bank on the same day, on the same grade, on the same employment scheme. After a promising start I thought I was doing quite well and seven months into my new job Neil was promoted, walk-

ing into the office with his letter, proudly showing it to anybody who would listen and talking about what he was going to do with his pay rise. "Congratulations, well done, fantastic news" I said. Inside I was in turmoil. How did he manage that? I'm better than him, aren't I? Where's my letter?

Two days later I found myself at the coffee machine with the Admin Manager and raised the subject. In that very British apologetic way (!) he said "Well, if you had spoken up about the good work you have been doing, like Neil, perhaps the big boss would have recommended you as well for that promotion".

"What do you mean" I thought, "doesn't my work speak for itself?" Obviously not! The next day I accidentally bumped into the big boss (actually I had waited outside

do you do next? Here are some ideas for you to think about:

- Find out from colleagues, members and trusted friends which people have power in your Club and develop excuses to connect with them (connect is trainer speak for talk to them, listen to them, have a chat, find out what is on their mind etc)
- Ask your boss about his or her agenda and what they really want out of working at the Club
- Network (meet, talk, bump into, have a chat, whatever you want to call it) with people that you don't know. Introduce yourself and be interested in what they think about the Club
- Learn the four different personality preferences that exist and practice saying the same thing in four different ways

**“Golf Clubs are like any other formalised groups of human beings – where there are three or more gathered together, thou shalt have politics”**

the staff restaurant for 55 minutes waiting for him to turn up and then accidentally bumped into him), he asked me to join him for lunch which gave me the opportunity to tell him how brilliant I was (in that British way again of course!). Skilful or manipulative? - Your choice!

The point being I was relying on the formal processes in the organisation to look after me when actually it was the informal processes that I needed to learn and to make sure I am tapped into as much as possible.

That was my first lesson about politics - do not rely on what they tell you are the processes for making decisions - the real way your organisation works is via the informal processes.

So, less of banking and me, let's get back to you and your Club. Take a look at the questions inset left.

Any answer which is 'No' to any question gives you a plan of action. An answer of 'No' to question 10 means you have no hope. If you don't believe that politics needs to be managed, there is nothing I can do for you. Apart from giving you my respect for making a decision that is going to be really tough for you and your career in the future. But hey, good luck!

If you've decided that you need to become more involved in Club politics then the question is what

- Think back on times that have gone well and not so well - what can you learn from them?
- Ask people that you trust at the Club about how decisions really get made
- Take time with the 'little people' at the Club (bar staff, receptionist, secretaries - with a small s) and develop a relationship with them so you can obtain information and knowledge when you need it (forewarned is forearmed)
- Practice managing the key political skill of 'Time and Place'. Know when to raise an issue and learn when to keep quiet
- Focus on outcomes, possibilities, solutions and not problems, difficulties and worries. Develop a reputation for positivity and action
- Stop avoiding people you don't like - the best politicians interact with everybody, otherwise they are not going to have the vital information that they need
- Start to use the informal processes that exist - identify them, where do they happen, when, who and what is covered?
- Accept that it is not only 'What' you do that is being watched by others but also 'How' you do it
- Learn to talk about yourself and your colleagues in the positive. If you don't, then no one will
- And if all else fails, go back and start again. Or go home. Back to the most political human group of all - The family!

**You and your Club...**

1. Are you clear on how decisions really get made in your Club?
2. Do you know how information flows in and out of the Club?
3. Are you connected with the people who have access to the power in the Club?
4. Are you aware of the key people in your Club and what their REAL agendas are?
5. Are you able to flex your approach depending on who you are dealing with?
6. Do you know when to shut up?
7. Are you able to make a bad situation look as if it can be improved, or do you see the downside in everything?
8. Do you take time out to be really interested in what is important for other people?
9. Do you make the agenda of your boss, your agenda?
10. Do you really believe that the politics need to be managed?





# Managing golf courses in the Arabian heat

MAIN: 2nd hole at The Els Club Dubai

LEFT: 5. Sea Isle Paspalum grass at the Al Hamra Golf Club

INSET LEFT: The 11th tee at The Els Club Dubai

Greenkeepers are all too aware of the problems caused by excess water – what about the issues posed by heat? Laurence Pithie travelled to a sweltering United Arab Emirates to find out

**The UAE is a federation of seven Emirates or principalities, the capital and largest being Abu Dhabi. Gaining immense revenue from oil, areas of the desert have been transformed as investment has been used to create a modern city and infrastructure consisting of commerce, retail, residential and tourism, not to mention golf courses, marinas, sporting arenas, race tracks and so on.**

Travelling within the UAE is relatively cheap, thanks to fuel costs that the western world can only dream of. Filling the car for £10 is quite a novelty along with the seven lane Sheikh Zayed highway that bisects Dubai.

The UAE's population of almost 8 million inhabitants, 2 million of whom live in Dubai, is served by 19 golf courses, albeit with some nine hole layouts.

The Emirates Majlis course was the first grass course in 1988 followed by almost one each year until the downturn in the global economy took effect.

Most of the newer courses are integrated into larger housing communities or linked to hotels that help guarantee success.

Fortunately this market is again on the increase and Dubai reputedly enjoys one of the highest hotel occupancy rates in the world. Peak season is from October to April with annual roundage varying from 20,000 to 60,000.

Some of the more popular sites are also floodlit, allowing golf to be played until midnight as darkness occurs much earlier throughout the summer than in the UK.

Winter temperatures are around 20C, whereas summer temperatures are frequently above 40C and therein lies the considerable challenge of keeping the turfgrass alive, especially when rainfall is negligible.

## **THE GOLF COURSES**

I visited several courses with Richard Crocombe, BIGGA International Member and Course Superintendent and Project Manager for Orient Irrigation in Dubai.

The majority of courses I explored were designed by Harradine Golf, making best use of the flat desert landscape and enjoyable for all levels of golfer.

Along the coastal fringes of the UAE where the golf courses are located the land largely consists of dune sand which is high in salt content, of a fine particle size and



**“Winter temperatures are around 20C, whereas summer temperatures are frequently above 40C and therein lies the considerable challenge of keeping the turfgrass alive, especially when rainfall is negligible”**



prone to wind blow in the form of sand storms. The warm season grasses consist of either Bermuda or Paspalum although some high-end courses overseed with cool season rye in the winter on tees, fairways and semi-roughs for either tournaments or presentation.

Drainage to greens is standard and on the fairways, this can range from soakaways to piped networks. Fairway drainage is important in order to allow effluent irrigation water to move through the profile as quickly as possible, thus avoiding the build-up of high sodium levels.

Treated Sewage Effluent (TSE) from adjacent housing communities, hotels or from the municipality is widely used for irrigation purposes.

On the Jebel Ali resort course, an on-site desalination plant provides clean drinking water for the hotel, apartments and clubhouse which is then recycled as TSE for the golf course and hotel grounds - good use of this precious commodity.

At the height of summer up to 12mm of water will be applied each night to replace the amount lost in ET. This equates to over 1 million gals (4,545m<sup>3</sup>) of water per night being used per 18 holes.

Compared to the amount used on a typical UK course this equates to just two nights watering!

More than three nights without water in the summer would place the turf under serious stress. Whereas northern European courses tend to have around 48Ha of natural turf, a typical course in Dubai will have well under half that amount due to water availability.

Apart from narrow strips of semi-rough, all external areas are of a 'desert' landscape and are managed as such. Great use is made of bunkers for similar reasons, with washed sand sourced from the dunes or imported silica sand from neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

## GREENS

Most newer greens are of a good size throughout the UAE, being largely built to USGA standards or similar. Either local 'red' or 'sweet' sand is used for construction or imported silica sand. pH levels are generally high, often between 7.5 and 8.0.

Bermuda TifEagle or TifDwarf are the most common grass types, although newer courses are switching to Paspalum Sea Isle varieties or Platinum TE.

The latter has higher heat and salt tolerances which gives it an advantage over Bermuda, but it has

to be managed more aggressively to combat thatch levels. In both cases, superb putting surfaces can be attained with mowing heights varying from 2.5mm in summer to 3.5mm in winter.

Root depth typically varies between 75 and 150mm in depth with OM levels dependent on thatch control measures. Green speed averages around 9 feet for visitor play to well over 11 feet for tournaments.

Mowing is by walk mowers only with up to 14 cuts per week; this in addition to 'turf ironing' 3 times per week. Fertiliser input is considerable compared to the UK, since these are 'hungry' grasses and growing all year round.

Nitrogen input can vary from 350 to 500 kgs/Ha per annum, likewise Potassium, whereas Phosphate levels are low. All greens tend to receive high levels of Calcium (various sources) to combat the sodium build-up with applications being 'little and frequent' namely every week but depending on the time of year.

Aerifying and top dressing practices are similar to the UK but with far more verti-cutting and light scarifying required. Insects are more of a problem than disease, with leaf feeding cutworms, army worms and root feeding white grubs being the chief pests followed by nematodes.

The key challenge with greens is to manage salinity levels within the root-zone by regularly flushing or drenching the greens to force downward movement of salt accumulation. The other main challenges are to control thatch and firm up surfaces and to maintain this during the peak winter season when the growth rate is relatively slow.

## MANAGEMENT

All courses in the UAE require intensive labour; with 18 staff for every nine holes being the norm. Around 20% of the time is taken up managing the peripheral desert landscaped areas which involves weeding, trimming, pruning and watering.

These areas vary in style and can range from palm trees to lower growing shrubs that can tolerate the heat of the desert sun. Presentation and attention to detail such as bunker and cart path edging is intensive, especially with prices of up to £200 a round.

Most Superintendents are either British, Australian or Kiwi, with the rest of the crew from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.



MAIN: Desert style landscaping at Jebel Ali Golf Resort  
BELOW: Feeding green with walk boom



On some of the larger properties, the deputy may also be from the 'west'. Staffing structures are very different to that of the UK and it is fairly common for the majority of staff to be limited to just a few different tasks, such as bunker raking, fairway mowing or hand watering.

Language can be a challenge but most will have a basic understanding of English since it is the second language throughout the UAE.

Superintendents need to have good management and organisation skills when working with large crews as well as a sound agronomical understanding of managing warm season grasses and the aspects of salinity.

This is not something that is likely to be encountered in the UK. Just surviving in temperatures in excess of 40C is a challenge in itself!

Whereas grass has to endure these temperatures 24/7, at least staff and golfers can take periods of shelter in air conditioned buildings or cars.

It was a strange experience to witness about 30 staff suddenly appearing in a fleet of run-arounds late in the morning and after quick refreshments, discovering that they had all gone to sleep for about an hour in adjacent housing accommodation. I've never seen a maintenance compound with so many people so eerily quiet!



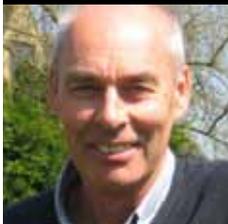
**SUMMARY**

Managing golf courses in this environment is indeed a challenge, with turf wholly reliant on receiving water, which in the heat of the summer, may not always be available in sufficient quantities.

Superintendents working in the UAE require a high level of skill and dedication, often working six days a week or more.

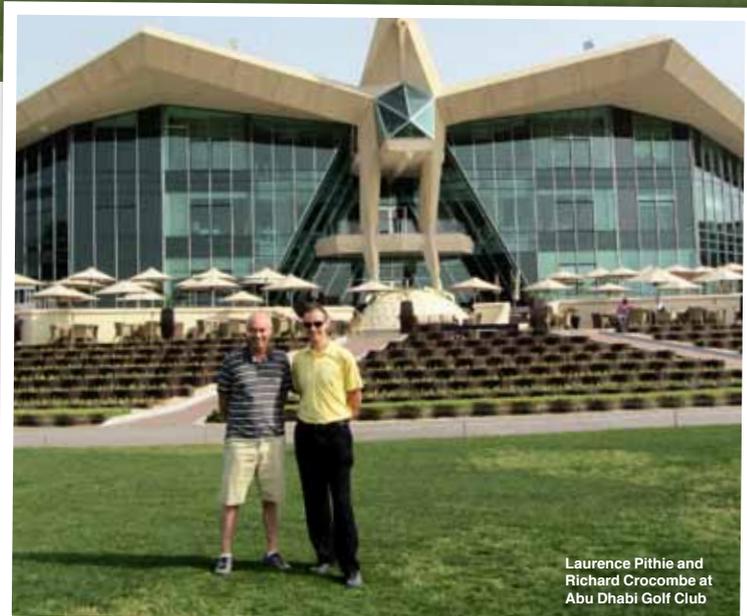
The rewards and experience gained can be high and everyone I met during this time had produced golf courses to a high standard in turf quality and presentation.

**about the author**



**Laurence Pithie MG**

Laurence Pithie MG is grateful to Peter Harradine of Harradine Golf who helped in arranging the course visits to the UAE and to Richard Crocombe for taking the time out of his busy schedule and for his considerable knowledge of turfgrass management in Dubai.



Laurence Pithie and Richard Crocombe at Abu Dhabi Golf Club

# Bracken ruin?



Graham Paul's latest BASIS article looks at the invasive fern bracken and how to control it

**Bracken is a rhizomatous species of fern belonging to the Dennstaedtiaceae family that are characterised by large, highly-divided fronds. Fossil records show that it's been around for 55 million years and for almost half of that time has enjoyed worldwide distribution.**

Originally classified as a single species *Pteridium aquilinum*, bracken has now been reclassified into about 10 species.

It's a survivor – able to adapt to a wide range of climates and conditions, so it needs to be kept in check for the benefit of the environment, wildlife and those farmers whose livelihood depends on grazing livestock on clean pastures. In this article I shall look at the plant; how it spreads, its positive and negative attributes and measures available to control it.

There are about 12,000 species of fern that belong to the plant kingdom group Pteridophyta. They reproduce by spores rather than by flowers and seeds and have an alternating life cycle but, like flowering plants, they do have a vascular transport system (xylem and phloem), roots, stem and leaves (known as fronds). Once established bracken will spread and colonise an area with fronds sprouting directly from the rhizomatous root system.

Bracken thrives in most habitats except for deserts and poorly drained land, occurring in all parts of the world except Antarctica. In the UK it was originally an inhabitant of woodlands, moorlands and lowlands but today it can also be found in upland regions, where the removal of large areas of trees to make way for sheep pastures has allowed it to become more invasive.

Bracken will tolerate soils with

a pH ranging from 2.8 to 8.6 and is found growing in the saline mists of coastal areas, although a combination of high winds and salt can cause scorching of the young fronds. Cold inhospitable climates in the higher regions of the UK limit the spread of bracken to those areas below 600 metres.

In cooler climates, bracken is a deciduous plant dying back completely in the autumn and sprouting again in late spring from the underground rhizomes. The first shoots are often referred to as the 'crozier' or 'fiddlehead' stage as they resemble a shepherd's crook or the curved end of a violin.

The underground root system for bracken consists of thickened storage organs found deep in the soil that are attached to thinner rhizomes growing much nearer the surface (see Figure 1 on page 42), from which the bracken fronds sprout.

These young fronds have a covering of bronze coloured hairs and are easily damaged by late frosts. The emerging shoots develop into large individual triangular fronds, each growing directly from the rhizomes and forming dense thickets. The fronds may grow up to 2.5m or more in height.

Bracken conquers new ground mainly by extension of the rooting system, however there is also a sexual stage involving the spores. These are microscopic and produced in structures known as 'sori', located in a linear fashion on the undersides of the fronds.

Production of spores takes place only in bracken that has been established for three to four years. The spores ripen from July to August but are not released until the autumn – usually in October.

A single frond can produce several hundred million spores



but many do not survive to become new bracken plants, as successful development of the sexual stage of the life cycle is dependent on frost-free conditions with adequate moisture, and without fungal attack on the germinated spores. Those spores that do germinate will eventually form a small immature sporophyte stage to complete the life cycle but, due to the size, these are rarely seen.

Once established in a new area, bracken will dominate and squeeze out the existing vegetation by a combination of tactics.