



The cost of the initial phase of the project should be determined, both in financial terms and the likely disruption required from remedial treatments.

Do not expect costs to go down immediately as investment may be required to address problems before savings can be made.

There are, however, potential long term gains once immediate problems are overcome, eg reduced chemical usage and increased revenue from a longer season on the main greens.

The decision to proceed with a programme of improvement must be discussed and approved with club officials and members, with detail about what the programme involves and a commitment to implementing it for at least a three - year period.

Expectations must be realistic and managed.

Implementation

The course management team must achieve the right balance between sward improvement and

playing quality. Focusing totally on playing quality can dramatically slow progress. Concentrating too much on sward improvement can see a dip in playing quality which could deter the club from proceeding further.

For those starting from a position where excessive organic matter, poor drainage and shade promote annual meadowgrass (*Poa annua*) dominance and inadequate year round playability, the initial stages of the process do not involve a change in grass composition but rather the development of the environment in which fine grasses can grow.

Good drainage is the first prerequisite in promoting firmer greens. Only when this has been achieved can fine grasses be encouraged. It is essential that the causes of drainage issues are clearly identified at the outset.

These may include underlying problems with soil quality or old drainage systems, poor contouring encouraging water collection, shade or excessive organic matter.

Depending on the severity of your problems, improving drainage, reducing shade and bringing organic matter under control can cause significant disturbance. Progress will be quicker with work that creates more disruption, eg coring, deep scarification and topdressing, but more gradual progress can be made with less disruptive programmes.

The same applies to the approach to other maintenance practices that have an impact on turf health and species composition, such as irrigation, fertiliser and pesticide use.

Although part of the aim of the programme is to see the minimum use of such resources, a rapid



will be once organic matter content to the top 20 mm of the profile has been reduced to a maximum level of 10%, with favourable conditions below.

When in a position to start overseeding, some trial work may be required to determine the most effective technique. This relates to the timing of the work as well as the machinery used and aftercare.

For those undertaking overseeding once a suitable environment has been created, browntop bentgrass is likely to work better than fescue if the sward is dominated by annual meadowgrass.

With an increasing bent content and further refinement of the maintenance programme a bent/fescue mix can be employed. In the first year of overseeding there may be a low uptake but this will increase with time.

Native bent and fescue grasses may colonise in addition to those introduced via overseeding.

Use the proportion of bent in the sward to indicate when the greatest chance of achieving results with fescue is likely. It is suggested that at least 40% bentgrass content, distributed evenly across a green, is required before this situation will arise.

Eventually, the proportion of finer grasses will come to dominate the sward and it may then be appropriate to switch to fescue-only seed.

To give seedling grasses every chance of growing to maturity, amendments to the maintenance schedule, particularly in relation to operations that could damage seedlings such as mowing height, verticutting and top dressing, will have to be factored in.

However, do not go to extremes and try to implement work that balances the needs of the seedlings with those of the golfer.

While the advice for most wishing to go down this route will be to reduce inputs, it will be necessary to guard against reducing them to too low a level.

This particularly applies to situations where organic matter has been reduced to within the target range and this potential source of nutrition is no longer making a notable contribution to growth.

In such instances, too little fertiliser and inadequate protection against pests and diseases can cause an unnecessary downturn in playing quality.

Getting this right is something of a balancing act and will demand all of the greenkeeper's experience.

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How does my club benefit?

- Reduce costs of maintenance
- Improve playing conditions
- Reduce environmental impact
- Improve staff safety
- Reduce risk of injury to staff
- Reduce risk of injury to golfers
- Reduce risk of injury to spectators

WORKING FOR GOLF

three deep scarification (two with sand injection) treatments; a level of disruption that few clubs could tolerate. However, clubs need to be made aware of the options available to them and the consequences of any action taken.

Throughout the programme, the maintenance schedule will need to be amended and refined to take into account progress made. For example, once organic matter is at or near the desired level, the degree of disruptive treatment can be relaxed.

Better drainage, less shade and organic matter under control will produce a situation whereby even annual meadowgrass is under less stress and the programme can put more emphasis on reducing inputs such as water, fertiliser and pesticides.

The schedule will need to be adjusted to take into account inconsistencies within and between greens. It is important that the course management team is not afraid to amend the programme if something does not work or when there is a better alternative.

When working on a thatch reduction programme intensive aeration can result in nutrient release from the residual organic matter, so the fertiliser regime will need to be adjusted as this source of nutrition promotes growth and when it diminishes.

Initial overseeding of finer grasses should be delayed until organic matter is adequately reduced. The best value from initial overseeding

about the author

Steve Isaac

Steve Isaac was an agronomist at the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) for 17 years. He then became responsible in 2003 for The R&A's golf course sustainability programme, working to protect the enjoyment of the game and to safeguard the financial operations of golf facilities, in a manner which preserves natural environments and enhances community engagement.

reduction when the sward composition remains dominated by annual meadowgrass will result in serious stress and deterioration in playing performance. The rate of reduction needs to be aligned to managing stress and retaining an acceptable level of surface quality.

The April 2012 issue of the STRI's Bulletin reported on a club that in just nine months reduced the organic matter in the 0-20mm range of the profile from just over 11% to under 5%! This was achieved through an intensive programme involving two coring and

Results and reporting

Recording maintenance inputs and measuring performance throughout the programme is essential. Such information will help define trends, act as a future record, inform management practices and give an objective rather than a subjective viewpoint.

Analyse your data. Simply collecting a large set of numbers is a waste of time.

Keep a record of the cost of any action taken to bring about a better environment, eg drainage, tree removal and additional maintenance operations. The decision makers in the club who are not greenkeepers may not be able to follow an argument for investment and trust in the programme if it is based on agronomy; they will have a better understanding of the financial implications – estimated costs and forecasted savings/increase in revenue.

Keep a detailed record of anything that causes a slower rate of success or reduced impact from treatments such as wet summers. Include these as part of your reasoning behind the value of the programme. They must not be seen as excuses!

Use the analysed data to report on successes, and failures, to club management.

Be aware that the intensity of work required to control a significant organic matter problem can result in an initial increase in annual meadowgrass content, due to the degree of disturbance involved. Once organic matter control has been achieved, and greater stability prevails in relation to surface preparations, the proportion of finer grasses may increase from native sources or from overseeding.

During the process everybody should be kept updated, including club official presence on site inspections, to visually show the results. Seeing IS believing – use a camera!

Annual presentations to committee and members should be considered, to inform on progress.

Summary

A clear pathway from soft, wet, disease-prone putting surfaces to firm, dry greens that perform well year round was the original hope for this project. The theory is sound, but there are many obstacles to overcome at any club wishing to achieve this aim, such as available resources, acceptance of disruption to play, internal politics and short-term thinking.



If you have successfully implemented a programme to produce a healthier putting surface environment and, in doing so, increased the proportion of finer grasses, The R&A would be delighted to hear from you. Send details of your achievements to Steve Isaac, Director – Golf Course Management, The R&A, St Andrews, KY16 9JD.

The outcomes of the project provide support for the theoretical pathway and also highlight the problems you may well face in taking it.

To enhance your chances of success, make sure you:

- *measure playability throughout the year to demonstrate that any disruption is short term and that it brings long term improvement*
- *record costs as every club wants to see the value of their investment, and you will have to invest in your greens to bring about the desired results*

• *communicate at every level to ensure that you take people with you. This includes your team as well as club management and golfers*

Although this project has come to a conclusion, this is not the end of The R&A's interest in the clubs involved.

We intend keeping in touch with them and monitoring their progress.

They are all committed to the process, which has demanded a radical change in approach for some, and their journey has only just begun!





From left: David Gibbons, Luke Pythion, Steve Yates, Craig Hartley, James Newbold, John Barsby, Neil Baker



Little first steps at Aston

Neil Baker was appointed Course Manager at Little Aston Golf Club in Birmingham earlier this year. Laurence Pithie met up with Neil to find out how he's made an impression in those vital early days in charge

Prior to taking over the reins at Little Aston in Birmingham, Neil's career began at Weston-Super-Mare in 1992 before he moved across the Severn for spells at Royal Porthcawl and then neighbouring Pyle & Kenfig as First Assistant and Deputy respectively.

A move to the South East followed in 2006 with seven years spent as Course Manager at Tandridge Golf Club; a gem of a Harry Colt designed course in rolling Surrey countryside.

Qualified to Level 3 in Sports Turf Management and being an A1 assessor, Neil is also keen to gain his Foundation Degree in Turfgrass Management followed by the BIGGA Master Greenkeeper Award he has just applied for.

MAKING THE MOVE

When I caught up with Neil I asked him about his move to Little Aston and what it entailed. He replied: "When changing jobs, it is not just about managing another golf course since there are usually other aspects to consider such as relocating my family. But this was the right decision as it was the next logical step in my career progression."

The course is recognised as being one of the best inland courses in the UK and is regularly listed in the top 100 courses in the GB&I rankings - a championship course set within a 176 acre environment of mature park and woodland. It has a tremendous history, having staged numerous tournaments, matches and competitions since its inception in 1908 and is currently staging Open qualifying for the next four years. So what were the key aspects for Neil in gaining this position?

"The club recognised the need to make a number of changes both on and off the course. They wanted to appoint a Course Manager who would take control, lead, be responsible and to work within the framework determined by the club.

"For my part, I needed to understand the club, their business and their objectives. Little Aston is no ordinary golf club. It is steeped in history, has a limited and exclusive membership, of which many are members of the R&A, including the Chairman of Green, Keith Andrews. Society and visitor play is minimal but there are a number of matches between former pupils from the top private schools in the UK. You never know who may be walking your fairways!



"Therefore, I needed to understand the way in which the club operates and to have a good feel for what the members want to see; their priority being good greens. When being interviewed for any position, it is important to do your homework and know the course and club where you hope to be employed. My role here includes being able to demonstrate my commitment to the club as well as my family, working the hours necessary to manage the course, but also to maintain a balance between the two."

INITIAL ASSESSMENT & NECESSARY CHANGES

Neil continued: "My first impression of the course was good but it was somewhat tired in places. A course policy document was in place but it was in need of updating. The club were working closely with the STRI as their course advisors but it is fair to say that many of the recommendations being made had not been carried out.

"Record keeping, staff training and safety management were all in need of bringing up to date. I needed to implement these measures and to manage the team here accordingly in order to get the best out of them and help improve the condition of the golf course.

"In order to gain the confidence of both my team and the club, I

needed some 'quick wins', while at the same time, developing and proposing a five year plan covering the greenkeeping structure and the strategic development of the course.

"This would include bunkering, woodland management and heather regeneration as well as the capital investment in equipment to achieve these objectives. Communication would be vital if I was to succeed and this would involve board and members' presentations when deemed appropriate, along with regular newsletter updates. Being able to respond to questions is part of a Course Manager's role, along with addressing members' wishes."

WORKING PROGRESS

As we toured the course, I asked Neil to detail the work completed and the practices now being implemented.

"The 'quick wins' were relatively straightforward, although as I started during 2013's bitterly cold spring these took longer to take effect. It was really a case of getting the basic agronomic practices in place along with improved course presentation. This required a greater level of intensity from tee divoting to greens aeration and from pedestrian mowing greens to rough management. To begin

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. Previously he spent 17 years managing multi-site golf operations in the UK. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.



with, some staff required extra hand cutting training and fine tuning to match the standards set, therefore there was an initial period of training and assessment; very necessary if the established goals were to be achieved. There were some interesting discussions along the way, but now we have a better trained and motivated team, which has now been increased in size to seven staff. I am fortunate to be able to delegate many tasks to my Deputy Course Manager David Gibbons.

“Greens were the first priority since some turf loss had occurred following previous Anthracnose Foliar Blight infection. Being shallow rooted, overall turf health had to improve, therefore aeration and top dressing intensified along with an improved nutrient program. This year, nearly 160 tons of top dressing will have been applied to the greens along with 140kg of Bent grass seed used for overseeding.

“This type of work is now being extended onto the front approaches to achieve similar results. The fairways were also lacking in vigour and growth and they too required

increased aeration and a general feed to improve sward density. This theme has continued, namely getting the basics in place and more attention being spent on turf health and playing surface performance.

“In terms of management changes, it was a case of getting to grips with implementing various working procedures such as work planning and labour scheduling, while focusing on improving staff training and general motivation.

“Carrying out individual appraisals and focusing on strengths and weaknesses, I was then able to identify what was required. This ranged from better clothing to time-keeping and turfgrass knowledge. It is all part of creating a better working environment where staff take pride and ownership.”

Another and perhaps unusual aspect at Little Aston is the 34 strong artisan section, whose ages range from 25 to 83. In return for free golf at certain times of the week, each person completes up to three hours per week which amounts to about 90 hours of additional work being achieved on the course. This mainly entails bunker raking and

BELOW: Large Colt bunker kept in good shape

edging, fairway divot filling and woodland management.

Neil added: “Part of my role is to improve the outcome of their valued work contribution and this meant implementing a number of changes. This proved to be a challenge since implementing change is not always easy. However, once the reasons were explained and examples of work practice demonstrated,



all was well and I value their effort and enthusiasm for making the course as good as possible.”

Apart from the general routine practices and improvements being made both on and off the course, Neil highlighted some other key aspects at Little Aston.

“The 100 or so bunkers are a major feature on this course which was designed by Harry Vardon. It was then remodelled by Harry Colt’s genius in 1916; this at a time when there were fewer trees and bunkers were hazards to be avoided. Through time, changes to club and ball technology and members’ expectations, many have lost shape. Plans are afoot to make the necessary changes. Another key aspect is heather regeneration which is the responsibility of my deputy. Fortunately David has been growing heather on site since 2009. The planting of numerous young heathers, plus on site heather stock grown from seed generously donated by Jon Wood at Enville Golf Club, have been used on many of the holes to date. This followed acidifying and other prep work to the soil as well as tree removal and again this forms part of the overall strategy.”

CONCLUSION

When I was on site with Neil, a young apprentice was being given a tour of the course by the Deputy before starting work the following week.

When he met up with Neil, his advice was short and to the point; “Don’t be late, work hard and enjoy what you are doing”. This approach is at the heart of his style of management.

When asked to sum up what advice Neil would give to other Course Managers who are about to start a new job his key tips were:

- Analyse your site
- Evaluate your team
- Produce and present a business plan
- Know what the members expect
- Walk before you run

He added: ‘It is all about managing the structure and any changes that are necessary and working to four key phases in your daily set up; namely to Plan, Organise, Lead & Control.’

Laurence is grateful to Neil Baker and Little Aston GC for their help and input in producing this article.



TOP: Young heather plantings on hole 12
 MIDDLE: Good example of managing the roughs
 INSET: Neil Baker



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Everything changes

Tammy Ball will be speaking at the Turf Managers' Conference next month – and here's a sneak preview aimed at managers and deputies as she examines how change in the workplace should be communicated



Change in the workplace presents itself in a variety of ways. It can be a complete transformation of how an organisation conducts business, it can be a minor change in a particular department's business process, or it can simply involve moving one employee's desk to the other side of a room.

In most organisations, the decision to change something comes after complex research and heated debate among leaders and management, or simply because someone noticed a desk was located in an inconvenient place in the reception room.

Leaders, managers and supervisors in a workplace environment are usually quite adept at recognising what changes need to be made in order to create opportunities to increase productivity or satisfy customers. However there is a big difference in deciding, doing and executing a sustainable change. Recent research indicates 50% to 70% of organisational change efforts fail, and the reasons for failure range from lack of leadership support to budget overspend. There is one overriding theme which stands out in all of the research in this field; the people affected by the change ultimately determine whether the change is executed in a sustainable and successful manner. In other words, Change is Personal. Why would the people in your organisation resist something new? Here are but a few things employees might say or think when asked to change how they work:

- Were we doing something

wrong? I thought everything was going just fine.

- I don't like outsiders telling me how to do my job.
- Is my job in jeopardy? Are they preparing for a reorganisation?
- This is stupid and I'm not doing it.

Here's an example. In early 2012, Jerry had just started his new job as training manager for a service organisation with 500 employees and about £7m in turnover. His first assignment was to train 450 of the employees how to use a new software program which allowed them to scan paperwork and file it electronically. This project had begun in 2011 and it was now all set for implementation. The staff would no longer need to keep or file physical papers in those disorganised manila folders which would not only free up physical space in the offices, but also allow them to access files from any computer. This new process would lend itself to a more mobile way of performing their job duties. What a great idea, right?

Jerry had been in a few meetings with the leaders and executives who had made the decision a year ago to set the project in motion. He was told the technology was in place, testing had been successful and everyone was excited to launch the training.

When Jerry arranged the training for the first 50 people, he quickly discovered a few obvious problems. He walked into the training room and immediately sensed palpable feelings of distrust and resistance. He thought the staff would actually be excited (as he was told) and full of anticipation to learn something

new and innovative. Instead, the majority were either overtly rude and sarcastic or withdrawn. As he continued to present the training content and introduce the new step-by-step processes, he uncovered some of the ugly truths that would ultimately halt the entire project and place the implementation of a multi-million pound investment in jeopardy. Jerry knew some things about change in the workplace and was beginning to understand this particular change was fraught with problems and he knew if he continued with the training part, the project would fail. He realised that although the concept of this new technology was very sound and the many benefits were undeniable, the people responsible for using it and making it work had been left out of the planning process and decision-making. In fact, they had not even been informed of who, what, when, where, how or even why this change was taking place. They were simply told it was mandatory to show up to a training class.

Jerry scheduled a meeting with the leaders responsible for the new technology project and went to work creating a new plan to show them. Having spent a day with that group of employees who were expected to implement and use the new process, he suspected the level of resistance would pervade throughout the company and ultimately cause the project to fail. Jerry had some ideas about how to salvage the implementation and turn things around. He knew that ANY change in the workplace has a greater chance of success if every employee affected by the change understands the following basic

