Golf agronomists today are under the gun

Standards for perfect turf constantly raised

'Belief of itself never established a fact, nor can it refute one. Investigation alone brings out the proof. It is the facts in greenkeeping that count, not the opinions.'

— The Bulletin of the USGA Green Section, April 1926

By JAMES LATHAM

It is incongruous that, despite the number of ongoing turfgrass research programs in this country, we are faced with a seemingly increasing number of major problems in golf course maintenance.

Superintendents are better educated, scholastically, than ever and have almost unlimited opportunities for continuing education. Golf course are being served by more competent sources of information than ever — in the form of publications, consultants, computer networks and very knowledgeable suppliers.

But the golfers are restless. Superintendents are edgy. Agronomists are frustrated. Does this mean that the scientific approach to turf culture is failing to provide for the needs and desires of golfers, or have we reached the agronomic limits of what can be accomplished?

The answer may lie in reassessing the demand for and supply of information needed to fulfill the goals of maintenance operations.

The challenges today are much different than those faced three or four generations ago, when scientific investigation began to encroach into the art of greenkeeping. Then, disease, insect and weed controls were of primary importance in the perfection of golf turf.

As these problems were eased, the agronomic side of golf turf production came to the fore and has remained there since, especially when comparing the B.S. age with the A.S. age (Before Stimpmeter and After Stimpmeter.)

In the B.S. age, 3/16-inch was considered to be close mowing, but was not universally practiced — mostly for competitions. To provide playing surfaces capable of withstanding today's heavy play and tournament-like heights of cut, a number of changes were required, namely new cultivars, new growing media, new procedures and new equipment.

None of these were Breakthroughs, but the results of basic scientific research and careful field observations.

Changes have been evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.

James Latham

But as we near supposed perfection, true improvements are more difficult to achieve, or the paramaters of perfection are being raised. It is still an effort to produce and maintain "U.S. Open Conditions" for a week, and some golfers demand them all season.

Did anyone ever consider why the Open is held in mid-to-late June? Why not early August? Perhaps some-one con-sidered the weather.

Did Toronto bentgrass really fail strictly because of a bacterial disease? The collars didn't die. Are all these "new" diseases really new, or are the highly defoliated grass plants simply incapable of resisting infestation by micro-organisms previously considered too weak to be of concern?

Why aren't bentgrasses more shade-tolerant? Beautiful but pocketed green locations were cited as problem areas in the 1920s, so why should they be less of a problem today; with additional stress from excess defoliation and more golfers? Maybe grass breeders need more emphasis on shade tolerance and other physi-

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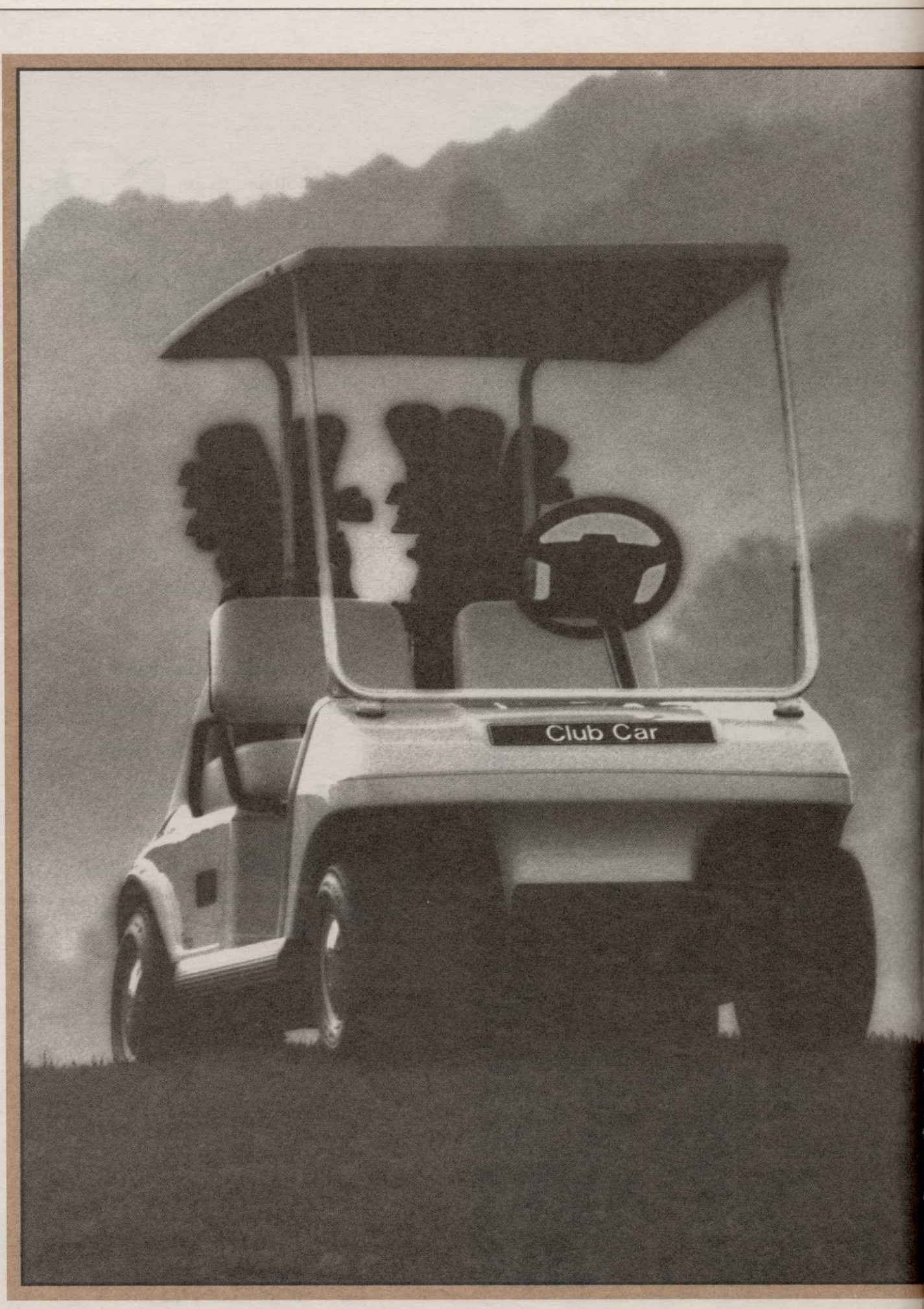

James Latham is retiring at the end of the year after 40 years in the turfgrass field. A Texan who holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Texas A&M University, he has been director of the Great Lakes Region of the U.S. Golf Association Green Section since late 1984. He has been a Green Section agronomist for many years and was on the agronomic and Milorganite marketing staff of Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. He received the Distinguished Service Awards from the O.J. Noer Research Foundation and Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association, and holds honorary memberships in several golf course superintendents Associations.

Supers on the move

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DODGE CITY, Kan. — There's a new sheriff in town... **Shawn Ackerman** is the new golf course superintendent at Dodge City's Mariah Hills Golf Course.

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ALPHARETTA, Ga. — **Mark Dinan** is the new golf course superintendent at Crook Creek Golf Course in Alpharetta. Dinan comes to Crook Creek from Council Fire Golf Club in Chattanooga, Tenn., where he served as an assistant.

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HERSHEY, Pa. — **Ron Diefenthaler** is the new course superintendent at Hershey Country Club here. When American Golf Corp. (AGC) bought the course — about two weeks before the Lady Keystone Open, held each year at Hershey — the management company summoned Diefenthaler from his prior post in Toledo, Ohio.

"I've never turned down a challenge," said Diefenthaler, a Big 10 man who isn't intimidated by his new home in Nittany Lion country. "I have a bachelor's degree from Ohio State. I'm a Buckeye, through and through."

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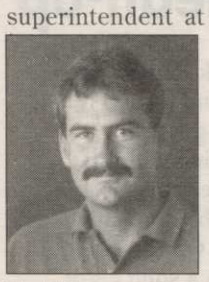
WELLINGTON, Fla. — **Scott Mau** has been named golf course superintendent at Palm Beach Polo and Country Club here. The 36-year-old Mau had been responsible for the 54 holes at Port Royal on Hilton Head. The Ohio State University graduate can relax now — at Palm Beach Polo, there are only 45 holes to look after.



Scott Mau

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CONYERS, Ga. — **Scott Dornbrock** has left his post as golf course superintendent at Atlanta Athletic Club's Riverside Course for a similar position here at Legacy Golf Club, which remains under construction. Randy Mangum has replace Dornbrock as head super at the Riverside Course.

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OKEECHOBEE, Fla. — **Fred Flora** has been named greens superintendent at Blue Heron Golf and Country Club, a three-year-old development here. Only nine of the proposed 27 holes are open for play. Flora, who came to Blue Heron from Placid Lakes Country Club where he worked under Bob Harbough, will oversee construction of the remaining 18 holes.

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REYNOLDS, Ga. — **Barry Bell** is the new superintendent at Reynolds Golf Club here. Bell had been the assistant at Brickyard Plantation.

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COFFEEVILLE, Kan. — **Randy Sweet** is the new superintendent at Hill Crest Golf Club for the city of Coffeeville.

Under fire

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ological problems of green and fairway cultivars rather than simply adding another look-alike to the long list of available "brands."

Incidentally, who can keep track of the many bentgrasses, bluegrasses, perennial ryegrasses, bermudas, etc., entered in the National Turf Evaluation Program tests?

It may, however, be easier to develop a new grass for greens and tees than to convince a bunch of tree huggers that as long as golf is played on grass, it should have priority over other species.

The growing medium for greens has been a subject for disagreement or, at least, discussion by superintendents and agronomists for many years.

While the current Green Section procedure doesn't ensure total success, just think of trying to sustain total turf cover under intense play on push-up greens mowed according to today's standards.

Remember that those greens depended on surface runoff for most of the drainage and that close mowing significantly limits legitimate hole placement. We can thank high-sand top dressing and all types of aeration for the survival of most of these older greens.

We still need more information, and in more detail. Special investigations are needed regarding plant reactions to environmental stresses other than those now under study.

We must have more information on the soil conditions — even in sands — which affect the oxygen supply required for strong root growth.

The agronomics of golf turf management, along with the allied sciences, remain the basic tools necessary for keeping us on track with current demands. The research work today must be more finely honed than ever, and that will take more time. And money.

While all of us in the field have theories, beliefs or feelings, hard data still provides the most reliable information. It helps us to overcome the many differences between the supply of super turf and the demands of super golfers.