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Don't Force Grass Beyond Its Strength:
Advice From Garden City's Greenkeeper

By RALPH TROST

"EXERCISE your grass. Treat it as you would the human body. It must be fed. It must have water. But it cannot lie around having everything done for it. The human must exercise. So must grass on a golf course be naturally fitted." These are not the words of Hugh Luke, greenkeeper at the historic Garden City GC, scene of the 1936 national amateur championship and home club of the late Walter J. Travis, than whom there never was a more finicky green-chairman.

The words are the reporter's who, noting not only the fine, smooth turf of the course, but also its power to recuperate, seeks to summarize Hugh Luke's thought.

Slight, baldish Hugh Luke, a scratch golfer as a youth in Scotland, is too keen a greensman to fall for catch phrases or slogans. "But what you've penned there is the gist of the matter," Luke admitted on reading the first paragraph.

"I'll talk of Garden City," Luke agreed when the reporter asked questions, "if you'll not forget that golf courses are as



Hugh Luke on one of his greens at Garden City.

individualistic as humans. What I'll tell you will fit Garden City where the course is flattish, built upon sandy loam that drains rather quickly, where most of the greens are open to the wind and sun where the course is old—and where we set our green mowers at 3/16 instead of the ordinary 3/8 of an inch.

"Garden City conditions are not typical of the whole United States. However, we do meet conditions that are ordinary and if what I can tell will interest other greenkeepers I'm willing to try.

"The basis of Garden City's greenkeeping is not to press the grass beyond its

strength. We water less than more. We'd rather have a grass be truly healthy and developed to endure than merely look a pretty green above the ground.

"We—as all those who played in the National Amateur championship will attest—do keep our course keen. We try for turf rather than for just grass. But even though the course is laid out on a sandy loam and drains with reasonable swiftness, we have to spike plenty.

"Where there is real turf there is also a section of rather solidly packed roots, then dead roots and partially decomposed vegetable matter that starts from about 1½" below the surface and may extend down 2". This stuff holds water. That it does is part blessing. It's also the part that must be aerated. It is, therefore, the section getting most attention.

Spikes

Greens Often

"I spike our greens as much as I can. Twice a month is not too often. We use spikes 1½" long. I'd like to use longer ones but longer spikes would also be thicker and spikes do leave marks. On greens cut at ⅜" the marks left by spikes are quickly covered by grass. On 3/16 greens they remain evident. Larger spikes naturally would leave more evident marks so 1½" stuff is the longest we can use. However, a good rain or watering closes the holes in reasonable time.

"Using a power machine in spiking permits spiking a green two ways, up and down and from side to side, in short time. But, of course, our ordinary time of about 1½ hours per green doesn't hold when a number of greens are being spiked, for while the machine may maintain speed the human slows down.

"The power machine has to be checked occasionally.

"Some greenkeepers prefer forking. If conditions are favorable, forking is the more effective job. However, I find an old green with dense root growth doesn't return to its previous level condition unless heavily rolled, and to use such a process there is recreated the condition that forking was intended to relieve.

"We water as we have to. I'd rather use water sparingly. Greens too well watered show a lateral root growth rather than the more desirable nearly perpendicular growth.

"Grass of the sort that is not native—and on Long Island I know of only one common golf grass that is native and that is *poa annua*—will live the easiest



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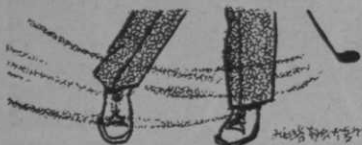
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way. Just like a human being. And that way is to get the necessities of life the easiest way. Put the water where it can be readily reached, up near the surface, and the roots will grow, often bulbously, that way.

"Laterally rooted grass will tend to mat, an undesirable condition most difficult to correct in its worst stages. The food area will be lessened and allow less chance for growing what every golf course needs and that is plenty of individual shoots. Furthermore, too heavy watering brings on another mean situation in which grass roots, through easy access to water, do not bother about growing under ground but veritably blossom on top. That, of course, makes them susceptible to any grass ailment coming along.

"At Garden City no unusual topdressing methods are employed. Naturally, we attempt no topdressing in really windy weather, for to do so would be to lose not only the topdressing but also the labor. We did less than usual this spring because of the peculiar winter.

1937 Spring
Favored Poa

"As any one who has seen not merely Long Island but almost any part of the eastern seaboard will attest, this has been a *poa annua* spring. The courses are loaded with it. The reason *poa annua* is having itself such a time this year is that we had growing weather in the late part of March which started the native *poa* in advance of the imported grasses. Then along came a cold April and *poa*, the native, coped with these unfavorable conditions better than the finer grasses.

"Certain kinds of velvet were at a distinct disadvantage, being later growers than most other grasses even when conditions are favorable.

"Such conditions have been experienced before. When the finer grasses came up, the *poa* had gone and golfers soon forgot the *poa* or developed other worries. However, my opinion is that a course is weakened by each of the *poa* visitations and that the cumulative effect will tell in the long run.

"On our tees we had a good illustration of how backward this spring has been. We've had to plug with hole-cutter plugs parts that usually recovered with just a rest, or, at most, a topdressing. In this section the sort of winter you have is not as important as the kind of spring."