



## From the Captain's Pen

By D. Booker

EDITOR'S NOTE: A couple of issues ago, I remarked that this feature for that issue should have been named "From Across Town" because the author was a local journalist.

Well, perhaps a better name for the feature in this issue would be "From Around the World". The author is a golf club member in Scotland; I believe it is Royal Dornoch Golf Club.

I received this interesting piece from Jim Latham. Here's what the note accompanying it said: "The attached article was received from Mr. Joe Luigs of Indianapolis, a member of the USGA Sectional Affairs Committee, former Green Section Committeeman, widely travelled golfer and close observer of course conditions wherever he plays. The Scots have a knack for going straight to the point and this author does just that."

There are quite a number of pertinent points in this article; how many do you recognize from personal experience?

To see ourselves as others see us is, as Robert Burns wrote, a divine gift. It is an experience both humbling and chastening, but it is a force for the good if the lesson is heeded. It is an obvious truth but one which cannot be restated too often—that a Club's main asset is its course. In a broader context, the game's most important assets are also its courses—not its players, of whom there is no shortage. If golf ever starts to lose its popularity, two major reasons will be that courses are not in a fit state to take large volumes of play or not in good enough condition to ensure that such play is enjoyable. British golf's historical attitude to greenkeeping has been—and still is in many cases—astonishingly disorganized, penny pinching and arrogant. Disorganized in that, despite the best efforts of many individuals, the profession still has no overall established training framework; penny pinching in that all areas of training, recruitment and machinery routinely suffer from serious budget deficiencies; and arrogant in that golfers, especially the better ones, have never ceased to interfere with course management, usually from a position of very little knowledge'. (*The Way Forward*; *R & A Greenkeeping Panel*).

Did that hurt? Well wait, there is more. The panel identifies four distinct

types of player in most clubs, the first two being (1) those who play golf as a serious game, possible several times a week throughout the year and, (2) those who play golf at least once a week, generally with the same people and whose game is in the mid to high handicap range. Category (2) represents the silent majority at many clubs and category (1) represents the vocal minority who tend to make outstandingly unreasonable demands or have unworkable ideas, which make the lives of greenkeepers so difficult. Are you now getting uncomfortable? Let me add to your discomfort. "With regard to course management, the technical knowledge of categories (1) and (2) is either non-existent or at best woeefully primitive". Now that the knife has gone in, let me turn it a bit.

"Committees (particularly Green Committees) will almost always be composed of golfers from categories (1) and (2) and their knowledge of course management is slim, yet they have the right to make fundamental decisions in this area, a right which they frequently exercise. Too often, decisions are made which go against the advice of greenkeeping staff and consulting agronomists. Worse still, because of lack of continuity inherent in committees, those making bad decisions will not even be faced with their consequences...In general terms, the Green Committee suffers from precisely the same effects...An interest in gardening or farming is deemed sufficient expertise to enable members to dabble in the running of the course...whatever else may be wrong with the many other forces impinging on course management, there is no doubt that the committee structure represents a most serious obstacle to meaningful process, perhaps the most serious".

I remember my first AGM (1960) when I was taken aback that most of the meeting was taken up in debating whether the annual subscriptions should be raised from 13.3/-(13.15p.) to 13.4/-(14.20p.). Although the Club badly needed the money, the proposal was defeated partly because of a feeling that the local members should get their

golf for nothing, they being ratepayers. That feeling still persists. I did not then, nor do I now, understand the logic. The Royal Burgh never did, and the District Council does not, pay the green staff and the cost of maintaining the courses and providing the machinery.

The cost of maintaining a municipal course in Scotland is in most cases higher than the cost of maintaining R.D.G.C.'s two courses. The cost of membership is often greater and you have to queue at 3 a.m. to get a game at weekends!

I believe it would be ill-advised to dismiss "The Way Forward" as a gut reaction. The gut, admirably designed as it is for the digestive process, is a poor substitute for the thinking process. The panel is composed of very experienced people who have given of their time freely and their thoughts are expressed out of a genuine concern for the future of that game which we all love. Their views deserve respect.

I do not believe that all the criticisms in the document can be applied to R.D.G.C. Much has been done by R.D.G.C. to enhance the status of its greenkeepers and to provide for the education of apprentices. However, I am certain of one thing: R.D.G.C. cannot afford to have frequent changes of Head Greenkeeper if the excellence of its courses is to be maintained. A period of continuity is required to build up that essential experience which well qualified men can only get with time and a greater knowledge of their course. Nor should realistic salaries and wages be left out of account for, if these lag behind what is being paid nationally and internationally, the quality of life in Sutherland and the love of one of the world's great courses may not be a sufficient makeweight.

The message for members of golf clubs, particularly members in the panel's categories (1) and (2), is for the golfer to educate himself to not make unreasonable, unrealistic or unworkable demands of the greenstaff, to be more willing to seek, accept and put into effect the advice of the Agronomist and the Head Greenkeeper, to understand that essential work on the courses cannot be held up because of the dictates of an overcrowded fixture list or those coming to Dornoch for a holiday and, finally, to be more willing to pay a realistic subscription for membership of the Club.