



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By William Newton

Editor's Note: In a round about way that involved an article in the Ontario (Canada) Golf Superintendent's Association publication I wanted to reprint, I have had several conversations with William Newton. He wrote this piece specifically for THE GRASS ROOTS.

He was in private business in Toronto for 25 years as a designer specializing in corporate identity programs. Although he was well regarded as a corporate designer, he now concentrates on golf writing and related projects with a focus on golf course architecture and the traditional aspects of the game. His company, Golf Images International, provides marketing and design services to the golf industry. His son Matt is currently studying to become a greenkeeper.

Newton comes by his interest in golf and golf course architecture naturally. His grandfather, Matt Thompson, was a golf professional and one of the five brothers of what has been called Canada's greatest golfing family. Another brother was Stanley Thompson, considered to be one of the world's finest golf course architects.

At one time, both Robert Trent Jones and Geoffrey Cornish worked for Thompson, and Jones later became a partner. Thompson and Donald Ross were founding members of the American Society of Golf Course Architects. Many of his designs are still listed annually in the top courses of Canada and rank with the best traditional courses on the continent.

Because most golf courses have more than one hole, you would think that a greenkeeper would be called a greenskeeper. But not so. Since the days of Old Tom Morris — probably the world's first golf course superintendent (amongst his many other golf-related occupations) — it has been a singular descriptor.

The choice of the word green is also strange because early golf in Scotland was played on grass more often brown than green. And much of the "keeping" was done by hungry sheep. This made-up title of greenkeeper seems to be consistent with the idea that the principal preoccupation of the superintendent is to keep a course green. Or is it?

In the perception of most golfers, and particularly those belonging to

private clubs, it probably is. Imagine the reaction that might result from Saturday morning members if the first tee, or part thereof, was a color other than green. What if a patch of dandelion had taken over a corner of rough displaying its dreaded yellow hue? Far worse, imagine the report to the Greens Committee (why is it plural?), if there was some sort of discolored ring around the collar.

Unfortunately, this "green" perception has become too prevalent amongst golfers, partly because television and magazine images portray overly manicured golf courses. This conditioning, and perhaps the high cost of a 1990s membership, creates false demand for perfectly green playing fields.

But it is naive and unrealistic to assume error-free turf with today's budget and environmental restraints. The modern player should learn to live with conditions that will not always be what has become the picture-perfect norm. And stop tongue-wagging to the Greens Chair.

After all, the game's challenge is still dictated by sound architecture and not turf lushness or an artificial palette of green. Two current examples of this come to mind: during the 1994 U.S. Open at Oakmont, the greens by Sunday were no longer green and, probably, within twenty-four hours of agronomic death.

The second example was the 1994 U.S. Senior Open at Donald Ross' beloved number two course at Pinehurst. Clearly, many parts of the slopes surrounding his hallmark inverted-saucer greens were, heaven forbid, brownish. But, both these memorable old design masterpieces were carefully selected years in advance to provide for a proper "examination of golf".

Many members I have played with at different private courses talk more per round about the inefficiencies of their superintendent than about the last book they read, or their own course management, or whatever. This business of green and tidy, it seems, never

leaves their minds.

Where are they at 6:15 in the morning when greenkeepers are making their rounds like a dutiful surgeon at a general hospital? Where are these experts when the same person is attending an evening Greens meeting? And where are they at 3:00 a.m. when a security guard calls to report vandalism, or a misbehaving sprinklerhead?

We should appreciate what greenkeepers actually do to keep the course functioning, which is more than simply growing grass. They are people managers, budget watchers, property keepers, communicators. The greenkeepers I see are constantly on the move — checking work progress, directing construction, writing reports, supervising daily schedules and inventory needs. All of this in the pursuit of not just keeping the grass green, but maintaining a high standard for the golf arena.

Although greenkeeper is an honorable and traditional title, it is appropriate any more? Is the word superintendent any better? I think not. Because of the specialization and multiple responsibilities now required (including the need for continuous educational upgrading), this job should be regarded as being part of the high-end contemporary golf course management. If this is true, then greenkeeper does not cut it. Equally so, superintendent doesn't measure up.

But what about Director, Turf Management Services, or Manager, Golf Course Operations, or simply Turf Director? Perhaps the most appropriate title is the one used to identify Australian superintendents — Curator.

This Jack or Mary-of-all-trades needs a new moniker. And given that golf courses might become considerably less green in the future, how about Turfkeeper? Anyway, it might be something for the greenkeepers to think about in the coming months.

It seems to be the only part of their game which needs work — a fact that might cause a few honorable members to be green with envy.