

## GRASS CLIPPINGS 13

### “WHY OUR GREENS HAVE DETERIORATED”

#### Introduction

At the recent Level One Seminars I spent some time discussing the deterioration in our greens and having put forward my own views invited the audience to discuss whatever they thought might be pertinent to the subject.

I now feel I should share some of our findings with you. This issue of GC13 will, therefore, be devoted to discussing the woes of Green keeping.

While the lack of expertise was the prime reason for the deterioration some interesting contributory factors were suggested.

What did transpire was that the deterioration was in three phases –

- 1955 - 1990 This was only due to lack of expertise – Previous “C” s became Ds and Es

- 1990 - 1995 A slight improvement in “A” s and “B” s

- 1995 - 2007 Another deterioration which included more “D” s and “E” s than before and fewer “A” s and “B”.

We have now reached the stage where -.

- 1 Not a single District can offer Bowls SA 10 greens (5 X two green Clubs) grading at 87 % and which are in close proximity for an Inter-District

- 2 One District had 40 “A” s and “B” s in 1995 – now there are 11

- 3 10 of our Districts have not got a “B” graded green

#### Historical Review

To say that green keeping has deteriorated one must have a starting point when our greens were better than they are now. I am, therefore starting with an article “Hail the Green keeper” which appeared in the SA Bowls Magazine in 1946 – “Our greens are better now than they have ever been and we doubt whether they can get any better”.

I started green keeping in 1949 and I can vouch for the fact that although the greens of that time were slower the greens were completely covered with a dense mat of healthy grass. They were mostly “C” grades with a few “B” s and very few “D” s

They were good because all we did was mow, irrigate, and fertilise. We had no equipment to control or thin out the mat and through the growing season the mat got thicker and the green slower.

The Post War resurgence in outdoor sport meant that substantial funds were made available for Turf Grass Research - their big problem was how to control the proliferation of the mat.

The introduction of the “Groomer”, “scarifier” and the “verticut” and much later the brush enabled the GKP to produce a much faster green – the danger here being that if an untrained GKP did not have the training to appreciate the balance between leaf area and speed – weak and bare areas would appear on the green.

The golfers quickly realised that “modern” green keeping required more expert supervision. They took the “high road” and employed professional green superintendents to look after their green – and paid for it.

The Bowlers being more conservative took the lower road and, although they bought the equipment, were not willing to commit any funds to employ a professional GKP and expected their GKP to make do - bowls still relies very heavily on voluntary workers.

The Bowls GKP was under pressure from his members to produce fast greens - he used the new equipment without being aware of the dangers associated with thinning out the mat too vigorously. - By reducing the leaf area to a level where the grass plant could no longer sustain growth some of the grass plants died leaving weak and bare areas. “C” greens became “D” s and “E” s. – This situation prevailed for many years until the end of the 1980’s, it seemed as if more GKP’s were improving their management skills and the greens improved

Until 1988 the SABA greens Standing Committee had only been concerned with inspections of greens for all the SA Tournaments. With the introduction of a data base it became easier to recognise trends and to take on a teaching role in addition to the inspections.

Seminars in different parts of the RSA started producing results – so much so that the number of “A”s and “B”s actually increased...

#### AFTER 1995

After 1995 green keeping in the RSA entered a second phase and greens started deteriorating again. This trend has now reached crisis proportions.

#### 1 The South African Bowls Green keeper

Bowls Green keeping conditions in the RSA can only be compared with those encountered in Australia because we in Southern Africa, with the Aussies, are, the only major bowls-

playing countries where the game of Lawn Bowls is played outdoors in the winter. Whereas the GKP in the UK and New Zealand could lock up his club in late autumn and return in early spring we and the Aussies had to prepare a green in the autumn which would take us through the dormant winter months – a daunting challenge.

The ability to build-up adequate Carbohydrate reserves in the autumn to cope with the wear and tear of the winter is an attribute not commonly found amongst untrained GKP's. Neither does he have the expertise to deal with Heinz greens (95% of our greens are Heinz greens).

At the same time our South African GKP has to cope with more wear and tear than any other GKP in the world – the Aussies do not have ribbed shoes or Heinz greens.

While our green keeping conditions can only be compared with Australia our GKP is a far cry from their highly qualified professional GKP.

The South African GKP is normally retired or of fairly advanced age with no academic or institutional training. He supervises the work of the Greens Assistants. His period of usefulness to the club is limited. He receives little or no remuneration. He is often the butt of criticism and ill directed banter in the club and, often, becomes introspective, morose and “difficult” because he does not know enough to counter the “advice” he receives from the members, especially the “speed clique” in the club. In fact, it is almost as if he isolates himself (and green keeping in general) from the club.

Unless he makes an effort to attend seminars his knowledge and experience is limited to his own “trial and error” with the error factor only diminishing when he is thinking of retiring from green keeping.

We must remember that our SA GKP does no physical work and cannot therefore justify full-time employment at a club

## **2 Difficulty in Recruiting Green keepers**

Around 1995 a number of things happened – the attitude of the ordinary citizen hardened as far as charitable works was concerned.

They were no longer prepared to work for others. Even in the Bowling Clubs this tendency was apparent in the catering where, our ladies dug their heels in. This also happened with the GKP's and in the clubs no one was prepared to become a GKP – as the older ones retired the clubs were hard-pressed to replace them.

One wonders whether those wise men who decided in the 1950s not to follow the golfers but to rely on voluntary workers to keep the Bowls boat afloat were not digging a hole for us 50 years on.

## **3 Cessation of Municipal Assistance**

The withdrawal of Municipal expertise and assistance had a profound effect on green keeping in many cities. Most GKPs had no idea how to carry out or advise on Annual Renovation or how to level a green.

With the Municipality no longer controlling renovation many club committees openly encouraged their GKP to cut corners or not to renovate at all

Some contractors appeared on the while many did the renovation correctly others scene took the clubs for a ride.

## **4 Funding**

One of the main complaints was the way the Club committees have reduced the funds available for Green keeping. It is an unfortunate fact that green keeping costs have escalated faster than inflation – yet the annual increase in their allocation is always less than the inflation rate. Club committees are more concerned with keeping the subs low without facing the realities of inflation.

At the meetings I asked many of the delegates what the fee structure was at their clubs. I was amazed at the discrepancies

In the East Cape we still separate Green Fees from Subs. At my own club I pay a R 150 sub (this does not include affiliation fees). I also pay a green fee of R 12.00 every time I play i.e. 3 times per week @ R36.00 X 50 weeks Total =R 2100 per year. At many clubs they paid less than R500.00 per year (sub. green fees and affiliation fees) and play as often as they like.

Without commenting on the merits (or otherwise) of a composite fee against separation of the fees it is obvious that some clubs have painted themselves into a corner and cannot get out of these low fees in order to finance improvements to the greens.

For any Club Treasurer to propose a 50% increase in the fees would result in his being speedily retired.

Authors Note - While the contribution from the Bar would influence the amount required from Subs etc. my own estimate for a composite fee would be R850.00 (without the affiliation Fee). My calculations show that if the number of players per week is 90% or more of the number of playing members in the club, then the club should separate green fees from Subscriptions.

condition of the greens as a guide to where they should stage their district events.

## **5 Lack of Interest in Green keeping.**

At the AGM of a Club the new Committee “inherits” the Clubhouse and the Greens. None of the new Committee members mind becoming involved in or giving advice re the Clubhouse. None or very few are prepared to become involved with the greens because in the club environment there will always be some criticism or talk of the greens and your average Committee members prefers to distance himself from such a minefield because it might make him unpopular

In a survey undertaken in the UK some years ago the Greenkeepers were asked “When last did your President walk around the greens with you”- 95 % answered “never”. This figure is no better here.

It is, therefore inevitable that when Two Committee members are delegated to attend the District Council meeting it is unlikely that one of them would be genuinely interested in Green keeping.

When a District Exec. is elected the chances of having a person sympathetic to our cause on the District Exec. are nil. The same could apply when the District representatives at the National Council elect a National Exec.

Note - This is not the case at the moment with Allan Freeman (a former GKP) being on the Bowls SA Exec. Allan has championed our cause at Bowls SA level and I must admit that Bowls SA have, recently been much more accommodating when it comes to the allocation of venues for our major events than in the past – I wish we had a few more Allan’s at District level.

**The fact that a number of Districts were not interested in sending delegates to the seminars is further proof hat they are not interested in green keeping.**

The Department of Sport publishes a very good magazine called “**Your Sport**”. Its recent issue (first Quarter 2007) contains a special 22 Page review on “Careers in Sport “ – not a single line on careers in Sportsturf Management – enough said – that omission, to me, epitomises the attitude of officialdom.

## **6 Lack of Motivation**

Most people, even GKPs, thrive on praise and recognition. It is not surprising that in those Districts where the Dist. Exec. recognises good greens by giving those clubs their District, events that there is some healthy competition between the GKP’s to get that recognition. Unfortunately, this applies to less than 50 % of the Districts – the majority do not use the

## **7 The Ageing Process**

Green keepers are quick to admit that they are getting older. Yet how many of them admit that a bowling green is also subjected to the same processes

In the upper layers of the soil there will inevitably be a collection of old undigested material and husks of old roots. They are taking up space and of no use to the grass plant. They add congestion to the thatch layer. and only serve to produce a more yielding substratum. This will inevitably slow down the green and interfere with the absorption of nutrients and water.

At the same time there will also be the encroachment of foreign grasses which will only be combated if the GKP is vigilant and acts immediately he sees a foreign grass. (The fact that the number of Heinz greens is steadily increasing is an indication that GKP’s have not been vigilant enough)

Levels – A green’s levels are not static and over a period there will always be some subsidence or “heaving” of the lower layers. All these problems will from time to time require some drastic intervention.

The remedy for the above ailments is usually removal of the upper layer with a sod-cutter or replanting and levelling at the same time.

When you have an ageing green and an ageing GKP where the will and drive to tackle these procedures is not there anymore then you can only have a deterioration in the condition of the green.

Recently I have been struck by the number of GKP who, in the old days, consistently produced “A” and “B”’s has now allowed those same greens to lapse into “C” s.

Without losing sight of the excellent work they did before they have now got to the stage where they are only prepared to maintain their greens without tackling any major procedures.

## **8 Comment**

We have slipped into a conditioned state where we accept mediocrity as the norm but we are still willing to expend vast sums to send teams to an Inter-District or SA National to play on greens where there are inconsistencies in the draw and weight rendering precision bowls impossible.

The sad thing about it all is that even the players have stopped complaining – are they really so scared of losing their GKP that they would rather endure the “ slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” than complain about the greens

Imagine an up-and-coming bowler, practising his delivery, delivering a bowl which goes off line and he cannot tell whether there was something wrong with his delivery or an inconsistency on the green

## **9 Where should we begin?**

**My first question is “Should we begin at all?” Can we change what is so embedded in officialdom that the chances of us changing it are nil. – Anyway, here is what I suggest**

### **8.1 Education of GKPs**

- Seminars have their place – in those Districts that want them.
- Distribution of Educational material – We will have to by-pass the Districts and distribute directly to the GKPs – Bowls SA is creating a direct line from us to the Greenkeepers

While the education of a GKP has the highest priority this “new “knowledge is not going to do any good unless the Club Committee and members accept the authority of the GKP when he proposes changes in his management programme which might result in slower but healthier greens.

8.2 One of the possible outcomes for us is the fact that whereas a new GKP has to rely on “trial and error” for a few years before he becomes more proficient the “Level One Book” will help him bridge the gap and shorten the “trial and error” period.

8.3 Education of Club members and Club Committees - Create an appreciation of Green keeping and a desire for better greens in the clubs and players and recognise the authority of the GKP - We had originally felt that once the GKP had a Level One Certificate the other members (including the know-alls) would acknowledge his new status by accepting his opinions in the same way that they accept that of the Tech. Official. Now, with the lack of interest shown by some districts we wonder if there will be enough GKP's with Level One Certificates to make any inroads on the deprecatory attitude to green keeping

Note – In this respect I realise that many of our GKP are as much to blame as others in that they should seek out the President and his Committee and force him to take an interest in what he is doing

8.3 The Districts will have to make the condition of the greens their guide when they award their District Tournaments even if one club gets all the competitions – the others will soon learn.

At the same time the host club must get adequate compensation for hosting the Tournament in the form of Green Fees.

I must say I have been disappointed at the brazen attitude Districts have adopted when they apply for a South African Tournament. They have applied for Inter-District events knowing full well that they do not have the greens to stage the Tournament

8.4 Funding – It does not cost any more to produce a “C” green if your green is grading a “D” or “E”. It was bad management practices which produced the “D” and “E” green originally and by avoiding those pitfalls a “C” green would follow.

It might cost a bit more to have a green levelled or replanted by a Professional but then the club would be looking at “B” or “A” grading

## **9.0 Final**

These comments are based on my personal observations at the seminars where I had ample opportunity to pick up the vibes - I must say I was shocked at the apathy.

I know there were bright moments and it is those “bright moments “which have made me consider seeing this through to its conclusion and continue with the compilation of the Level Two Book

P.S. An unexpected ray of sunshine the other day when I listened to Fanie De Villiers and his cricket programme – he spent the whole programme on the management of a Cricket Pitch