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Golf in a Covid World

As life returns to some semblance of normality after the challenges of the past few months, I find myself seeing subtle differences in how golfers and golf club administrators perceive things. In my experience, golfers are slipping back into a mindset where they can play golf pretty much as before (barring differences to do with flagstick, bunker rakes and so on), whilst those with responsibilities for managing clubs are much more focused on risk management and financial health into the future. A lot of golfers still appear (thankfully) to be in the “isn't it great that we can get out onto the course again” mindset, and show more tolerance than usual for the slight imperfections that may exist (in their eyes) in how the course is presented and plays.

Given the extremes of weather that were experienced during lockdown (the wettest February and driest May on record in many parts of the country), it's probably as well that there weren't any golfers out on the course. More importantly, the fact that The R&A, the national golf federations, and BIGGA had built good relationships with the Parliamentary Golf Group and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport over recent years was instrumental in the golf industry being able to convince government that greenkeepers should be allowed to stay at work and deliver essential maintenance during lockdown. Without this, leaving golf courses fallow for three months would have created huge problems which would have taken months to overcome. Getting greens back to a high quality surface would have been a major task if no maintenance had been permitted. I wonder how many of our members appreciate this?

Interestingly, lockdown also put the impact of golfers into perspective. The restricted greens teams found that their productivity was significantly increased without the disturbance caused by having to share space with golfers when trying to work on the course. There seems to have been considerable variation between clubs in the numbers of staff who stayed at work and, whilst the initial focus was on essential mowing, basic nutrition and irrigation, many teams found they were able to achieve more than anticipated in the absence of golfer disturbance. Also, swards have generally strengthened, and worn areas been able to repair, as courses were rested. And some clubs took the opportunity to carry out repair work or small scale development work that would not otherwise have been possible at this time of the year.

Naturalisation has been another outcome in many places. Reduced cutting of roughs has often led to the appearance of plant species now rarely seen on golf courses, and carry roughs have often been re-established. Course definition has improved as a result. There have been some (thankfully rare) unfortunate consequences, such as the decision made by Bristol City Council to close 9 holes on their Ashton Court golf course until mid-July as the result of green-winged orchid appearing in the uncut fairways. But generally, the flourishing of wildlife within the roughs has enhanced the setting and context of the playing areas without impacting on the playing of golf.

An unexpected consequence was the enhanced public use of some golf courses during lockdown by the general public, especially in Scotland, for exercise. There were some concerns that this might cause problems when golfers returned, but this doesn't appear to have been realised. Instead, there seems to be increased public awareness that golf courses are pleasant green spaces, often with good quality environmental features.

A bigger challenge for the industry may well arise from the tougher economic times that are inevitable as the UK starts to recover from lockdown (second spikes not withstanding). On one hand, the initial restriction of play to golf club members, rather than visitors, seems to have led to some nomadic golfers realising the benefits of being a member of a club, leading to influxes of new members. On the other hand, as the economic impacts of job losses, falls in investment income and other economic pressures begin to bite, membership renewals in the future may start to reduce, and this (along with reductions in food and beverage income as a result of social distancing requirements) implies that club income is likely to become more pressured. It seems to me that finding ways to become more resilient and adaptable in how golf clubs are managed will become ever more necessary. This is especially true of the golf course itself, where moving towards more sustainable management approaches, less reliant on high-input regimes, can offer financial advantages. Interestingly, golf course architects are now recognising that this is an area where they can provide practical advice to clubs, with the European Institute of Golf Course Architects taking a lead. In these circumstances, the need to manage golfer expectations is only going to increase, and ensuring that the General Manager, the Course Manager and the Professional are on the same page in this respect is vital in raising golfer awareness of these fundamental issues.

Progress on the R&A led Golf Course 2030 initiative has been impacted by the Covid-19 restrictions, leading to the deferral of completion dates for the many individual projects within the programme. But the importance of building in resilience and adaptability to golf clubs and golf courses has become even clearer, with growing awareness that issues such as water management and worm control are ones that will require more imaginative solutions in the future. With up to 60% of golf clubs in England drawing their irrigation water from the mains, and the cost of water likely to rise steadily as the impacts of climate change bite ever harder, the need to consider capture and storage of rainfall and surface water can only increase. Paradoxically, clubs are also becoming more and more aware that drainage issues are becoming more pressing. Many drainage systems on golf courses are very old, and are often blocked by tree roots, but we are all familiar with the challenges that arise when it's proposed to remove trees.

Worm control problems aren't going to go away either, with the likelihood that legislative restrictions will become tighter. Increased recognition of the importance of cultural management will become more important, especially actions to reduce levels of organic matter in the sward. Removal of clippings from fairways, and use of sand dressings, are likely to prove beneficial, with growing acknowledgement that areas managed as fine grass tend to have less worm problems than coarser grass areas.

Lockdown, and the consequences which have followed, have caused all sectors of society to look again at how things are best done into the future, and golf is no different. Using this opportunity to drive some fundamental re-thinking about how clubs operate could well prove beneficial, and it would be a shame to pass it by.