

DO NOT DISTURB!

by

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Putting surfaces dominated by the bents and fescues provide consistent year round surfaces. Unfortunately, many of our greens continue to be dominated by annual meadow grass. A recent survey conducted by all STRI agronomists in the UK and Ireland for The R&A proves this is the case. The results showed the average species composition in our golf greens in 2005 to be 56% annual meadow grass, 32% bent, 7% fescue and 5% perennial ryegrass/Yorkshire fog. Out of 598 courses assessed, 75% had greens supporting more than 50% annual meadow-grass. The annual meadow-grass dominance makes our greens vulnerable and inferior during the winter. This information shows how many courses may be failing to reach their potential.

History has always blamed excessive fertiliser and water applications to be the main cause of annual meadow-grass dominance in our greens. I used to as well until I considered the ecology of the grasses involved. The article “Changing the Nature of your Greens” explains this in more detail (www.stri.co.uk). In summary, annual meadow-grass enjoys disturbance while the finer grasses flourish in a more settled environment. Annual meadow-grass is so successful in golf greens because the environment is so disturbed or being constantly damaged. Disturbance pressure comes from surface preparations and of course play. In this article, we examine the effect of surface preparations on sward composition. The aim is to help you think about the preparation of your greens a little differently.

The true cause of annual meadow-grass ingress comes from the creation of gaps in the turf. Constant physical damage (or disturbance) of the grass plant creates these gaps. Modern greenkeeping practices and their mechanisation have radically increased the disturbance pressure imposed on fine turf. We now incessantly mow, verticut and groom in an attempt to please the ever more demanding modern golfer. While such aggressive practices are done for the right reasons, they might, in the end, be causing

untold harm. The symptoms can be seen when the turf thins and the soil surface is exposed. Annual meadow-grass is adapted to exploit these conditions. It may therefore be true to say the misuse of the triplex mower and modern turf refinement tools are one of the main reasons for annual meadow-grass dominance in our golf greens.

Before we had these ultra efficient tools the amount we refined our greens was restricted by time and the physical constraints of the human body. For instance, it took a long time to mow greens with a pedestrian mower and even longer when using a push mower or scythe! Not to mention the physically demanding nature of the work. This meant it was largely impossible to over-manage and over-disturb putting greens. Consequently, the golf green environment was settled, which allowed the fine grasses to dominate. Fertiliser and water were kept to a minimum, as over-application simply made the grass grow faster! Greenkeepers knew the surface would be inferior if grass growth was rapid. Growth was the last thing they wanted. A settled, undisturbed and unproductive environment suited the finer grasses. It also produced the best year round putting surfaces. Old Tom Morris understood this.



“Fast growth was the last thing greenkeepers of yesteryear wanted when they were using scythes and birch besoms. This meant a settled and unproductive environment was created in which the finer grasses flourished.” Photo courtesy of St. Andrews Links Trust.

The tranquillity of this settled and unproductive environment was forever interrupted with the introduction of the triplex mower around 1968. Suddenly, greens could be mown in a fraction of time meaning they were done so more regularly. They were even mown when it was not necessary! Further technological advances allowed the machines to follow contours, which facilitated ever closer mowing. In essence, triplex mowing increased disturbance pressure on the turf.

Soon after the triplex mower came the introduction of more efficient and effective turf refinement tools. These mechanical tools with their motor driven rotating steel blades (now with tungsten tips) were much more aggressive than the bristles of a brush – you can almost see the fine fescue and bent turf quivering at the prospect! Their ease and efficiency of use allowed the frequency of operation to increase. The result was increased disturbance pressure on the turf.

The use of the triplex mower and more efficient turf refinement tools gave golfers the faster surfaces they demanded. However, little regard was given to their damaging effect on our fine turf. To put it simply, the fine fescue and bent could not cope with the damage. Consequently, the sward began to thin and gaps were created. Annual meadow-grass exploited these gaps – the invasion had begun. To help the thin and damaged turf recover, more fertiliser and water was applied. The annual meadow-grass thrived in this more disturbed and productive environment. Our fine turf putting surfaces began their decline and many would never be the same again. The era of aggressive surface preparation and high input greenkeeping had arrived (to our shame).

Many greenkeepers ignored the trend of more aggressive surface refinements. They knew it would make their surfaces no better. To this day, courses that have upheld austere greenkeeping principles continue to provide the best putting surfaces. The greenkeepers charged with the management of these courses still follow what Old Tom did all those years ago. They know the slow growing fine fescue and bent grasses only require gentle refinement to produce high quality putting surfaces. While modern machinery is used, it is used with great caution. For instance, verticutting is implemented occasionally, and only when the fine grasses are growing strongly. The greens are never scalped. Fertiliser and water are always kept to a

minimum; as over application will only require more aggressive refinement. Consequently, these environments remain settled and unproductive, which is why the fine grasses continue to flourish. Old Tom Morris taught us this approach. We now call it ‘traditional greenkeeping’.



“Old Tom Morris taught us the real art of greenkeeping. Those that still follow these traditional principles produce the best and most consistent year round putting surfaces.” Photo courtesy of St. Andrews Links Trust.

The results of traditional greenkeeping were once again highlighted to the international golfing fraternity during the 2005 Open Championship played across the Old Course St. Andrews. During the Championship, the greens were maintained at 4.5 mm. Mowing was omitted when it was not necessary – the slow growing fescue and bent simply did not need to be mown every day. Light brushing, light top dressing, a little rolling and May verticutting was sufficient to provide over 10.5 foot on the Stimpmeter and smooth, true ball roll for the world’s best players. Contrast

this to the normal maintenance for major championships when the greens are scalped two or three times a day! It is obvious which grass this will promote.

I have perhaps blamed the triplex mower and modern turf refinement tools rather unfairly, as they are, of course, great innovations and have improved the quality and efficiency of surface production. Of course the problem does not lie with the machines but the way in which we use them. All too often they are used too frequently and too aggressively. Such misuse increases disturbance pressure on the turf. When the pressure becomes too great, the turf thins, gaps are created and annual meadow-grass invades. To help the turf recover from the pressure requires a heavier hand with the fertiliser bag and irrigation sprinklers. It is this combination of disturbance and greater productivity that leads to annual meadow-grass dominated greens.

I have no doubt that the production of better putting surfaces can be achieved by the promotion of the finer grasses. To be successful in this aim, we must adapt our management practices to minimise disturbance and reduce productivity. In essence, the way in which we prepare our surfaces must become less aggressive. This is not too difficult to achieve so let me describe some simple strategies...

- Reduce mowing frequencies. Ask yourself; do you really need to mow all the time? Can occasional operations be missed?
- Raise the height of cut. Every greenkeeper knows what height is comfortable and stress free for their turf. You should go no lower than this height. Do not push the limit of your turf it simply will not cope.
- Miss out the final perimeter cut a couple of times a week. The perimeters of the greens are where we see the first symptoms of excessive disturbance. Never engage groomers or verticutters on this perimeter pass.
- Relax verticutting and scarification. Consider brushing or light grooming to gently refine the turf. When verticutting or scarification is necessary ensure

the finer grasses are growing strongly to aid rapid recovery and follow with bent/fescue overseeding to encourage the restoration of full grass cover. Under no circumstances scarify when annual meadow-grass is seeding.

- Increase top dressing frequencies to smooth and firm the surface as well as diluting the thatch. Avoid harsh operations to work the material off the surface. This hurts your turf.
- Use rollers or a Turf Iron to provide a little extra pace and smoothness when required. This will ensure the greens can be maintained at a higher cutting height.
- Increase hand mowing instead of triple mowing as it causes less disturbance and allows you to closely monitor the environment.

The true reason for annual meadow-grass ingress into our fine turf putting surfaces was the creation of gaps in the turf. Aggressive surface preparations were one way such gaps were created. Excessive inputs of water and fertiliser were applied to restore the cover after damage. This created a productive and highly disturbed environment in which annual meadow-grass thrived and dominated. The current era of aggressive high input greenkeeping continues to promote this undesirable species. To restore the dominance of the finer grasses we need to provide a more settled and less productive environment. To do this we will have to prepare our surfaces differently but not to the detriment of the playing quality. The key to this strategy is the minimisation of disturbance. This means being less aggressive with your surface preparations by more cautious use of the triplex mower and modern turf refinement machines. With this approach, you will soon see the finer grasses returning to your greens.

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