

THIS WAY

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Close your eyes

Well that didn't work did it?! What a stupid idea. Couldn't see a thing. Sorry about that. Eyes open from now on. The thing is, you can close your eyes and imagine the perfect playing surface but how do you make it happen for real? How to create those firm, smooth, true and perfectly paced putting surfaces that remain a joy no matter what the weather? *How?* Read on with eyes open.

Dream come true

The achievement of your ideal playing surfaces will come by taking an objective and structured approach. You will need to work to a plan or a system that defines your objectives and monitors progress towards them. The system must tell you whether your efforts are making progress or if you need to alter things. To succeed you will need to create a situation where each and every element of the maintenance programme works together to bring about the desired outcome. The "Art of Greenkeeping" is simply the alignment of all the elements of the programme to push together towards the goal. The art of greenkeeping is about clear sight and informed decision-making. The key to success is to put together a plan that *tells you* how to make progress. And planning is so simple.

The Process

The planning process couldn't be more straightforward. You simply have to answer a few searching questions...

"Where are we now?"

"Where do we want to be?"

"How do we get there?"

"How do we know when we have arrived?"

This article will tell you how to structure your greenkeeping plan to help you successfully achieve your goals.

Where are we now?

Before you can begin formulating your plan you need an accurate assessment of the existing situation. The appraisal must provide an objective description of the current playing qualities as well as an evaluation of the agronomic issues that are affecting them. You need to know what is currently being achieved in terms of green speed, smooth/trueness, receptivity, consistency and year-round playability before you can decide what is needed. Agronomically, the areas that affect performance such as drainage, shading, soil type/condition, organic matter content, sward composition and sward texture need to be quantified to help assess how they are influencing the situation. You need to know the whole truth before you can decide what you need to do.

Where do we want to be?

You also need to have a clearly defined objective to target your aim. You need to envisage the greens performing at their best then define all their essential attributes. To be “authentic” (true to the design) the nature of the ideal surface should depend largely on the style of the course but the decision will also be influenced by the prevailing climatic conditions, the demands of the players and the resources available. Our firm and running links greens dominated by fine fescues are probably not going to be the goal for a modern “target golf” style development where the architect demands surface receptivity to reward aggressive approach play. These days the choice of ideal might also consider climatic change as well as business, economic and political (“Sustainability”) issues. You need to factor in all these influences when picturing your ideal surface type. Above all, if you are going to succeed the objective must be realistic and achievable. Gather feedback from all sources of valued opinion but ground yourself in reality. You will need the players and the committee to embrace the proposed developments to get consent to proceed.

The essential attributes

With the ideal in mind you then need to specify the agreed performance characteristics that you are aiming to achieve. This must be done in a way that is easily measurable for comparison with the existing situation. Be grounded when defining the upper and lower thresholds for the desired green speeds through the seasons (too fast can be as frustrating as too slow for some players especially on contoured surfaces). Stipulate the desired level of surface smoothness/trueness and assess it on a regular basis to help you create a surface that produces the perfect ball roll. The receptivity of the surfaces should reflect the design intention of the course, with the target level being set to reward well-stuck shots and skilful play. Consistency within each putting surface, between the putting surfaces and throughout the year is important and should also be refined to take out all but the subtlest variations. Year-round playability is of crucial importance these days and needs to be a focus of specific attention. All these essential qualities can be quantified and specified (stay tuned) to allow proper targeting of the ideal and help monitor progress towards it. You have to model the vision to be able to make it real.

How do we get there?

This is where the art of greenkeeping and skill of agronomy work together. It is decision time and we need to formulate a strategy to achieve our goal. Now that we know the existing and the desired playing qualities we can compare the differences and decide where the improvements need to be made. This is where we start using and interpreting the information. We draw from our experiences that will drive progress in the desired direction.

Your evaluation of different strategies should always focus on maintaining and improving playing qualities. If your plan causes playing qualities to decline for too long then the players will start losing patience and the plan will flounder. We work to improve the playing qualities by attending to the various “agronomic issues”. At this stage we need to pinpoint those agronomic factors that are adversely affecting the situation and holding back development. The main *limiting factors* tend to be poor drainage, shading and organic matter accumulation and so these need sorting out before any other progress can be made. The trick is to come up with a plan that achieves this without being too disruptive.

There are a huge number of other agronomic issues that impact on playing qualities (sward texture, sward composition, evenness of the blend, pest and disease activity, the development of dry patch, soil structure and conditioning, nutrition, irrigation, root development, etc, etc, etc) and these will all need to be assessed and dealt with along the way.

Our plan will only succeed if we deal with everything in the right order. For example, it is pointless overseeding to improve the quality of the sward before we have resolved the limiting factors of drainage, organic matter accumulation and shading, because it just won't work. The article "Pride and Joy" (at www.stri.co.uk) describes the 4 distinct phases of greenkeeping that are required for sward species development. Each phase has specific (and different) objectives that need to be achieved before moving on to the next. If sward species development is one of your goals then you will need to work in a specific order with intermediate targets to allow the development to take place.

There are always a number of different strategies that we could employ to achieve the objectives and we need to consider the implications of each (hollow tining versus deep scarification to remove organic matter for example). We need to choose the route that will most likely be successful, affordable and that you are capable of completing. This means taking into account the budgetary requirements for each approach and the level of investment required. The speed of progress does depend on having the available tools to do the job but again we need to be realistic. In the end we need to agree our best plan of action.

Buy-in

Once the best strategy for achieving the goals has been decided we then need to communicate it to your stakeholders to get the consent to proceed (be they Proprietor, Captain, Ladies Captain, Chairman of Green, Green Convenor, Committee, Secretary, General Manager, Membership, Staff or even Visitors). This must be done in a way that uses understanding to generate support and the desire to succeed. Your agronomist's report should be focused to assist in this regard, presentations can be very persuasive (with the help of your agronomist), newsletters, emails, and notices

can all help get the message across. Your various publics should all know that you have an objective and structured plan that if actioned properly will improve the situation. This will mean explaining the planning process and how you intend to implement it. It is important to get to obtain full support because you won't make any headway if your work gets shunted behind the fixture list. We need everyone to support the effort.

At last!

With the objective defined, the strategy agreed and budgeted for we can start implementing the plan. Thank goodness for that. As agronomists we do try to lay out a detailed plan with contingencies but obviously we are in the hands of the elements. It would be wrong to expect the recommendations be completed in full no matter what. Again, the skill of greenkeeping is about reacting to conditions to work towards achieving our goals. The greenkeeper is by far the most important element in this process and successful ones have drive, determination and awareness to take advantage of all available opportunities.

Close control

We will keep evaluating the situation through the implementation phase to keep a close grip on playing qualities and to see what headway is being made with the agronomic issues. If the plan doesn't appear to be working then we might need to try something different. The worst thing that one can do is stick to a plan that isn't working. It is important to keep objectively measuring the situation in a systematic way to be able to read the dynamics of the situation. We may need to adjust target figures in reaction to the situation but this should be seen as fine-tuning. We use our information system to light the way. We inform the decision-making and move towards our objective.

How do we know when we have arrived?

You tell me! In theory you just meet your targets but in reality it doesn't work that way. You will find that you never really arrive, you just keep fine-tuning the targets to continually maintain and improve the situation. The golfers and the revenue figures should tell of your success. You'll know when you are getting close when we start using a Clegg impact hammer to tell of minor inconsistencies in surface

receptivity for instance. You'll know by this time that it is the planning that is important and not the arrival.

Now that we are new

So there you have it. Planning is the route to success. What we have described in this article is the agronomy process as defined by the STRI's new "Performance Measurement and Development" (PMD) system. We have formulated a system that can accurately define and measure the playing qualities as well as the factors that affect them. We have a whole system of measurement and interpretation that can help you make progress. We hope you can see that by taking an objective, measured and planned approach you become guided towards your goal. You can see that a system of monitoring will keep things firmly on track. You can see that your success is a process and not a reward. This way for greenkeeping with eyes open.

Contact info@stri.co.uk to find out more.