

What happens when you get greenkeepers round a table and ask them to speak freely on some of the big issues in their jobs? We gathered a trio of turf managers to do just that...

Do greenkeepers really want to give presentations to members? How do they find dealing with committees and golfers? Who should have priority on the course?





A matter of
OPINION



D O YOU HAVE TO BE A GOLFER TO BE A GREENKEEPER?

CHRIS SHEEHAN: It would help if you could play golf, certainly, but I don't think it's essential. There's some great greenkeepers out there who don't play golf at all.

JAMES PARKER: I would concur with that. I think it's important to some degree to play the game to understand the playability of it. For me, when you play the game you understand that performance criteria a lot more – of what we look for when we play. But I would also agree that there are some very, very good greenkeepers out there who don't play the game. My course manager, where I was a deputy, doesn't play the game and does an absolutely outstanding job.

JACK HETHERINGTON: It does help but I also believe you don't have to be a golfer. If you're passionate about something, I think you want to know everything about that. So, you

will learn everything you can about the golf, as well as the greenkeeping, aspect. I am not a great golfer. I do play, but because I am passionate about my job I then want to learn about that aspect of it as well.

JP: Different things drive different people. When I came into the industry, I was driven by the fact I played golf first. That was the thing for me and my judge of whether the golf course was good was on a Friday evening. If I had that itch to take the clubs out and play I knew the course was in a good condition. That's what it is for me.

CS: It's especially (about) learning the rules of the game of golf. That's essential. If you've got a big competition coming up your course has got to be right – all the GURs, all marked and your out of bounds.

JP: Socially, within the club structure it can help as well. A lot of the things you'll be invited to within the club structure revolve around golf. So, if you are invited to play Captain's Day, or the open – I used to get invited to play in the mixed open with one of the lady members when I was in Scotland – it does help you integrate socially.



Left: Pannal's James Parker and Alnwick Castle's Jack Hetherington have their say while, **above,** West Derby's Chris Sheehan makes a point

JH: I used to work at Ponteland and a member of the team was a really good golfer. He was really well respected among the members because he was a plus two handicapper and what he said carried a lot of weight because of the fact he was a good golfer. It comes back to the social aspect.

CS: Some golf clubs look to the pro for advice on the course when, actually, just because he's a good golfer doesn't mean he necessarily knows anything about greenkeeping. You have got that side of it as well.

DOES THAT CUSTOMER-FACING ROLE COME EASILY TO YOU?

CS: It comes easily enough to certain people. There are still a lot of greenkeepers out there where it doesn't and they are not happy speaking in front of members, or even a small group of people. Maybe even at a greens committee they struggle a little bit. Obviously BIGGA, through their education programmes, can help with that.

JH: I feel I am much better on a one-to-one level as opposed to giving a presentation but I realise it is

going that way. I am trying to throw myself into that environment, so I will be better at my job. To be good in this role, you have to keep adapting and you have to keep up with the way it's going.

JP: I love presenting. It's one of the best parts of the job. I love educating our members on why we do what we do. I believe an educated member is a good member. At Pannal we've started doing presentations and social media because that's what we believe in. I also believe that we have quite a lot of big projects that need doing. A lot of this would meet quite strong member resistance, so I have to sell them a dream of what their golf course could be like.

CS: It does become difficult at times when you have a vision or you see the way the weather is going, for instance. At West Derby I said some years back the biggest problem we are going to have is drainage. Sometimes the drainage gets lost in the bigger picture, when a committee wants tees and greens rebuilding instead. You may convince them something needs to be

MEET THE PANEL



Chris Sheehan, head greenkeeper at West Derby, in Liverpool



James Parker, head greenkeeper at Pannal, in Harrogate



Jack Hetherington, course manager at Alnwick Castle, in Northumberland

“You can literally kill someone with a golf ball. There have been serious injuries and our fear is that it won’t be long before somebody gets killed.” - Chris Sheehan

Right: James Parker gets stuck into another issue while, **opposite,** Chris Sheehan discusses the challenges facing greenkeepers



done, but then you have a change of committee and new captains and it goes out the window. Your greenkeeper is your consistency. He knows where he wants the course to be in three, five and 10 years’ time.

JP: The structure of golf courses is becoming out-dated, I would say. You need a level of consistency and you don’t always have that because committees change every few years. You have got new ideas coming from left, right and centre. That makes it very, very hard, as Chris talked about, to get a focused plan for any long-term period. Within that, it’s very difficult for a committee to see past the emotive side. A lot of people are emotional about their golf club. They feel attached to their golf club, rightly so. It’s part of their family. It’s an extension of their family. When you get outside of that, if you look at general managers, boards and proprietary-owned clubs, they can see the actual business side. They can take the emotive out of it and see that, for the good of the golf club, we

need to do this. And it costs this.

WHO SHOULD HAVE PRIORITY - GOLFERS OR GREENKEEPERS?

CS: Most golf clubs that I know, if not all of them, have a policy where the greens staff have priority at all times. But, despite this, greenkeepers sometimes still find themselves in the firing line. That is the worst scenario and it not only hurts them from a mental point of view, it hurts them if the golf ball hits them. There have been many instances of balls hitting greenkeepers and causing serious injury. It has happened to me, and when you go up to the golfer and say ‘did you not see me?’ They say ‘oh no, I didn’t’ or ‘I didn’t think I’d hit it that far’. When you are on a machine, you can’t hear them shouting fore. As far as I am concerned, don’t play while the greenkeeper is on the green.

JH: Greenkeepers should have priority at all times. It’s easier for me to educate my three members of staff than



it is to educate all of my members and say 'right, you must give way at this time, but at this time we'll give way'. It's easier for golfers to give way at all times and for me to educate my staff when it's acceptable to make them wait and when it is not.

JP: If you've got somebody cutting a green then golfers should wait. Conversely, if the greenkeeper feels the task is going to take too long and hold up play, then by all means move to the side and let people play through. The difficulty is that the more we squeeze our tee sheets, which every club is doing now as we want to cram on as much golf as we can, then the fourball who are stood in the middle of the fairway feel under the same pressure as the greenkeeper on the green. They've got people on the tee behind them wanting to play. It's difficult from all points of view. But as long as the member and the greenkeeper can work together, I don't really see that it should be a huge issue.

CS: We had a health and safety expert in and he said 'I think all the greens staff should wear a helmet and hi-vis jackets when they are working on the golf course, so the golfers can see them and they know it's a member of the greens staff'. I said 'well, don't you think the same applies to visitors or any member?'

JP: We had a health and safety advisor that said completely the opposite. I mentioned about bump caps and hi-vis – I'm firmly against it – and he said he thinks it makes golfers more lazy if you give out bump caps and hi-vis, and the beauty of not wearing them is that golfers should then be on the lookout for greenkeepers. Safety gear doesn't stop golfers from hitting their ball, because they just say 'he's got a bump cap on. I'm going to hit it anyway. He'll be fine'.

CS: You can literally kill somebody with a golf ball. There have been serious injuries that have been caused and our fear is that it won't be long before somebody gets killed. ❀