

David Croxton,
Cold Ashby Golf Club

DON'T LET THE HEADLINES MISLEAD YOU!

Reduce inputs of Fertiliser and Water to encourage the finer grasses to grow and your greens will be more sustainable in the future. Those are the headlines we may have recently read, but it is a very dangerous message to take literally.

Anyone wishing to rise up the sustainability ladder must embrace the whole story not just the headlines. The story says that by reducing inputs of fertiliser and water you will certainly create the ideal environment to stress out Annual Meadow grass. But do the bents and fescues automatically take its place – definitely not. It will be necessary to put a number of other factors in place before those grasses can be relied upon to properly establish.

One of the most important of these is to define your requirements for green speed and how cutting height will influence this. It has been said that fescues/bents should not be cut any shorter than 4 mm. This, for many will require a change of mindset from previous management regimes.

Many courses particularly those inland and on heavier soils have produced good putting surfaces for much of the playing season by successfully managing *Poa Annua* to its optimum. Its “cause and effect” principles have served us well. Vigorous growth is obtained by adding nitrogen, drought is prevented by adding water, fusarium is treated by applying fungicide, dry patch is kept at bay with wetting agents, regular verticutting improves putting surface quality and height of cut (sometimes down to 3mm or lower) determines speed of the greens. This regime has, in the main, produced good playing surfaces, particularly in Summer and Autumn. Even the odd blip in late Winter and Spring when greens may not be at their best has normally been tolerated by players. It is also true to point out that managing *Poa Annua* in this way has proved to be a practice, which most Course Managers have been able to identify with and carry out. This is probably because it is clearly defined as to how the various operations are implemented and when.

So why change? Well it has been shown that where the environment is suitable for growth of bents and/or fescues then a change to these grasses can produce putting surfaces that should not require such generous inputs of fertiliser and fungicide and also may well be more consistent all year round. Indeed, we now have examples of courses where this transition has successfully been made.

There are, however, three key requirements when making this transition. The first is to ensure the conditions are right to support growth of Fescues and Bents. This entails

severely minimising thatch, getting the drainage right and allowing plenty of light. Point two is to liberally overseed with these grasses. The third requirement is never to cut below 4mm or verticut too aggressively.

Then, when the finer grasses have taken hold, and only then, can you risk stressing out Poa Annua by reducing inputs.

Management, of both quality and quantity, is perhaps the key when comparing the Poa Annua regime with the Fescue/bent regime. The "Poa Annua" method is an easier one to manage when you have all of the necessary resources, e.g. ample water, fertiliser and fungicide. For some this could prove to be the most sustainable path to take. The fescue/Bent way may offer greater long term rewards, but will require a high standard of management, particularly through what can be a difficult transition period. Once achieved, this too will need to be maintained for the long term.

There will be pressures – pressure from Poa Annua (a naturally self generating grass) to regain its dominance; pressure for more receptive surfaces; and pressure for faster greens for that special day (and hence reduced cutting height). It will be necessary to deal with this pressure and this will require a strong commitment. It is essential to read much more than just the headlines. It is the full story that counts

David Croxton is the proprietor of Cold Ashby Golf Club. He is working with Henry in the R&A/EGU's sward improvement case study/ research project.