

### **TALKING POINTS**

# **From the North Sea** to the first tee

Why a former soldier and oil platform technician settled on a career in greenkeeping

Gary Tonge, greenkeeper, Tain



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I'm in the middle of a career change: from working offshore in the North Sea to working towards my Level 2 gualification in areenkeepina.

I've gone from working as a telecoms technician on an oil platform, to being the course mechanic at three golf courses.

From golf courses with unlimited budgets to those with no budgets, my eyes have been opened to the world of greenkeeping and the differences within that world.

A career change to greenkeeping certainly wasn't planned and is not yet complete. My local club, where I was an active member and a part of the club committee, had a hydraulic leak with their five-deck rotary mower, used for cutting rough. With them having no mechanic, I offered to take a look. I found the leak, ordered the parts required and got the mower back on the grass again.

I really enjoyed pulling the machine to bits and putting it back together again and so I offered my services to the course manager. I would service and maintain his equipment as and when required and I have now been doing this for the past three years. I also now look after the equipment at two other courses, between trips offshore.

I decided that I wanted to study my Level 2 via distance learning to get a better understanding of what my clients required. The course manager at my local club gladly offered to educate, advise and evaluate my work, him being a gualified assessor.

While studying and working on the course. I realised that this is what I want to do: I want to be a greenkeeper.

The thing that I have realised more than anything is that greenkeepers are not governed by the same rules as other professions. So many factors affect a golf course and therefore the greenkeeper. In my view, the biggest impact comes from the course budget and there is a massive amount of disparity between one course and the next.

A course with a small budget has a small team of greenkeepers, less equipment and less spending power, so seed and fertiliser usage are at a premium. Equipment purchases are rare, so the latest technologies are way out of reach.

Then on the other side of the coin. there are the courses that have unlimited budgets. I am a member of a Facebook group and there are golf clubs that have teams of 25 greenkeepers, two assistant superintendents, a superintendent and a golf operations manager working on the course every day. My local club has three staff, including the course manager. My local club does not even have enough

machinery or equipment to occupy 25

greenkeepers, never mind pay them. One social media post I saw guestioned how many times a week the

fairways were cut (at my local club it is once a week). But this individual's club cuts seven days a week and has a bedknife budget of £8,000. That is the whole maintenance budget for my local course each vear.

Consider this scenario: you have not managed to cut the greens for two days due to very heavy rain. You are just about to leave the shed on the 10-year-old triplex greens mower to give the greens a cut before a large visiting party is due to tee off at 8am. This party will bring in £1,000 of much-needed green fees. But the mower breaks down before a blade is turned. You realise that it is not going to be a guick fix and so you need to adjust the height of cut on the surrounds mower so you can cut the greens. Your assistant, who was heading out to rake bunkers, divot and move tee markers, gives you a hand to get you on the course as soon as possible.

You make it... just! Leaving the 1st green as the visiting party tee off, you are now in a rush to stay ahead of them on the course and are unable to rake the odd bunker to help your assistant. Good job it is a four ball or they would catch you. The assistant has a choice, bunkers or tees? "I can't stay ahead of them doing both," he says.

The two greenkeepers are flying around the course, cutting greens and

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raking bunkers.

The following day your manager receives visitor feedback saying: "Great course, great layout, but your greenkeeper should start a bit earlier. It was disappointing to be chasing him around the course! The cut on the greens wasn't perfect, although true, and there were quite a few un-repaired divots on a lot of the tees."

A reasonable piece of feedback given the circumstances, but it could have been so much better.

The local supplier then comes out to repair the triplex mower, but does not have the required spare part required. Five days, two visits from the supplier and a hefty repair bill later and the greens mower is finally back on the grass.

In the meantime, you have had to adjust the height of cut twice on the surrounds mower so you can cut the surrounds and then cut the greens again the following day.

The same scenario at a big budget course... get on a different mower. The greens will only take an extra 30 minutes to cut as there will be three triplex mowers on the course, rather than the usual four. There are 15 other guys out there raking bunkers, divoting tees and



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fairways. The whole course is set up and ready to go in two hours.

Four hours later and the triplex leaves the 18th green just in time for the group to play their approach shots. "They only had to wait for us on one hole!"

The big budget club has an in-house mechanic and a store full of spare parts; within two hours the triplex is back up and running.

These two scenarios are maybe at the extreme ends of the scale in terms of »

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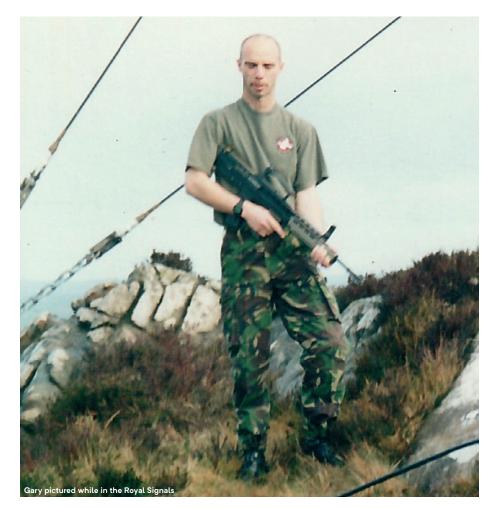
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budget, but they are an example of what actually happens. Yet neither the golfer nor the committee sees any of this.

I for one, being a golfer and a serving committee member, had no idea and little empathy to the struggles some greenkeepers have. I always wanted — no, I expected — the golf course to be in immaculate condition every single day.

But now, my eyes have been opened to a different world.

It is a world that revolves around the weather — the second biggest factor affecting the golf course and the restrictions that a course manager has to work within. Both that and the budget are largely out of their control.

Communication is key in every industry and I've worked in a few: from a metal fabrication yard, the British Army, offshore and the golf course industry. So, I'm of no doubt that for a golf club to succeed, there needs to be good lines of communication between the course manager, the committee and the golfer.

There are many committee members that like nothing more than to complain about the condition of the golf course. Take the previous example, there are committees that would see the feedback given from the visiting party and call out the course manager. They have no idea that the course manager did everything Yet without understanding the restrictions that each party is working under, they will achieve very little.

in his power to present the course in the best possible way for the visiting party on that morning!

At the same time, there are many course managers that like nothing more than to complain about the lack of money they have to spend on the course.

Ultimately, both groups want the same thing and that is the best golf course that they can achieve. Yet without understanding the restrictions that each party is working under, they will achieve very little.

It feels like committees and course managers sometimes work against each other to try and achieve the same goal. It's like two people sitting in the same boat, rowing in opposite directions, so they're just going to go around in circles. If they open up the communication and row in the same direction, they will make progress.

Committees need to understand the issues that a course manager faces from day to day. Working together, they can

prioritise the work on the course. Many committees have little or no understanding of what a bag of seed costs or how much work is involved in planting that seed in order for it to grow.

Not everything is one-sided and the committee will lack some knowledge and understanding. However, the greens team must strive to do their best every day. Some of the basic standards are not met and some expectations are not unachievable. When this is the case, communication with the course manager needs to happen.

However, it is not just about any communication, but the right kind of communication. Little or nothing is achieved by pointing fingers and shouting. A full discussion on what expectations are appropriate is needed and minimum standards agreed in advance of any issues arising.

There are many things that contribute to good and bad communication. There needs to be more of the good and less of the bad. There are plenty of training courses available and I would encourage anybody to attend one.

Communication is key, but it has to be the right kind. I was a member of the Royal Signals, providing communications to the British Army. We had a saying that we could communicate anywhere around the world — but we couldn't communicate with each other! How appropriate is that in today's golf industry?



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