

**The Autumn, Winter and
Spring of 2023-24**

**Reflections
From
British
Course Managers**

Introduction

I have been a golf course architect since 1989 and, in that time, I have been privileged to work with many of Britain's top agronomists and course consultants, starting with Jim Arthur. I have worked with hundreds of Course Managers, Head Greenkeepers and Course Superintendents across the world. I have the utmost respect for them and many have become friends, not just colleagues.

So, I have gained a good working understanding of agronomy and course management over 35 years - just enough to realise that I don't know nearly enough about it. It is so much more than "just grass cutting" with so many inter-related factors which all have to be considered on a day to day basis. If I am with two course managers together, it is not long before I have no clue what they are talking about. Greenkeeping is a science and an art.

This document has come about because we are living through the most extreme period of weather, which I can see has pushed even the ultra-positive course managers to the limit. Job satisfaction is at an all time low - going out in the rain day after day and being unable to deliver the surfaces that they want to offer the golfers. A constant thread in discussions with them was the morale sapping impact of those golfers who cannot see beyond playing the blame game and totally ignoring the unprecedented weather. The following statements follow a simple WhatsApp to the course managers on my phone contact list, asking for a couple of sentences on how they have felt about the last nine months. The course managers are all from British courses on all sorts of different soils. Many are Master Greenkeepers, others have decades of experience coming from greenkeeping dynasties and others have hard earned degrees in Turfgrass Science. They are leaders in their field.

The responses are a great reminder that greenkeepers are not robots (yet). They are human beings who take huge pride in the work that they do and who have feelings. Even if the unreasonable criticism is just from the minority, it really hurts them and badly affects the morale of the team as a whole.

I hope that this document may just make whoever reads it pause and reflect on the challenges that our sport faces and to make us work together to find solutions together. The reality is that the climate is changing and not for the good.

Tom Mackenzie

April 2024

"In all the years I have worked here, I have never experienced a worse winter, just constant rain.

The impact on the team morale is bad enough, but having to stop certain work due to flooding and saturated soil on a Links course is unheard of. I really feel for the teams on inland courses that have been impacted worse than us."

"As a 3rd generation greenkeeper I have been working in golf for the last 46 years and the last 8 months have been the most difficult I can remember.

Greenkeeping standards have moved forward hugely over the last 20 years and expectations the same, but weather is still the biggest contributor to what we can and can not produce in the south east.

Last year it started to rain mid July and did not stop until early April this year, which did not allow us anytime to let the course dry out in readiness for Autumn.

End of season aeration and repairs were very difficult to carry out, also

the worm season started end of August with the grass still in full growth not allowing for dry or clean cuts with some areas starting to look like early October in August. The temperatures were up producing perfect conditions for disease and the damp conditions were not allowing for spraying to be affective and in some cases too wet to drive from green to green. The temperatures stayed high all the way through until mid December where the ground conditions made it difficult to cut.

When it stopped raining the temperatures dropped to -7 not allowing for any movement on the course by greenstaff but golf was still being played. As the freeze came out the rain returned and anything that was walked on broke up the soil structure.

Damage done on golf courses from November to March do not start repairing until May. Over the last 10 years April has turned in to a no grow, cold East winds and frosty mornings turns all the surfaces thin hard and bumpy.

In summary it been a difficult 8 months. Courses can only be compared with each other if:

Soil conditions are the same

Micro climates on course are the same

Staff levels are equal

Investment is the same

Age of drainage is the same

Water table is the same

Water type is the same

Amount of golf played is exactly the same"

“Winter 2023/24 has been one of the most challenging we have faced in years.

Higher than average rainfall between October and March has caused water-logging issues on many surfaces.

It’s not just the volume that has contributed to this, the amount and frequency of rain days meant there was little respite from the puddling, worm casting, and golf traffic wear we experienced.

On the occasions we experienced no rainfall, the days were dank and overcast, meaning winter ET rates were very low. In simple terms, our surfaces were not getting an opportunity to dry out.

Our weather station measured much lower than average solar radiation levels, very few days without cloud cover. Deprived of direct sunlight, the most important energy source for growing turf, surfaces have thinned and are in need of intensive renovation work when the growing season finally arrives.

This has been one of the most challenging winters in memory and remedial work to restore surfaces will go into the growing season for a few weeks longer than expected. This is not a situation anyone wants, but a reality as we face more and more extreme weather patterns.

To ensure our course is better prepared for future winters, we are planning a full drainage audit with the intention of increasing our drainage capacity year on year.”

“The 23/24 autumn to spring period has definitely brought serious challenges with the incessant rain making it difficult to present the golf course to high standards and making it impossible to get heavier machinery around the links without causing damage . This winter we have seen up to 50 bunkers flooded due to the water table being so high.

The team has ploughed on, and somehow maintained high spirits but summer can’t come soon enough”

“After an extremely dry May/June, we then received 850mm in the last six months of 2023.

Now, halfway thru April, we’re in excess of 450mm for 2024 year to date.

During Feb there was one day that we didn’t register rainfall.

I think the most notable change in the weather is the frequent really heavy rain that we are receiving. A 3/4/5mm rain even used to be fairly significant but it now seems that 10/15/20mm is very much the norm ☹️

For us bunkers are probably the area worst affected playing area, followed closely by the grass pathway network. Bunkers have been near impossible to present in an acceptable condition, we’ve significantly restricted buggy use, had several areas of fine turf affected by standing water resulting in turf thinning which will require remedial actions and we have at times stopped all greenkeeping vehicles going into the course to prevent damage.

I guess, ultimately, the worst affected will be golfers who certainly haven’t had the opportunity they would expect from their membership due to awful playing conditions and the lasting detrimental affects of that weather.

We’re lucky as a links course, a few days of dry weather and a stiff breeze and here we are looking for rain in the forecast! Guys on heavier soils aren’t so lucky.”

“From my point of view, knowing what I needed to do on the course but never getting the window to do it was a huge frustration. 3 inches of rain in a week would be fine if it was in 1 day if we then had 3 days to dry out - we wouldn't have suffered if that had happened. But it was only getting 1 day here and there when it was dry enough and knowing that was probably the only opportunity to do anything even if it still was too wet underfoot. It was a case of picking the lesser of 2 evils, knowing that you are never achieving a great result is tough. This is what the guys found difficult as well - always asking them to go do a job where they are never really going to achieve a great result. I could see it was really de-motivating most of them doing that because they love golf and what they do. I tried to keep them looking forward and remembering the bigger picture which is tough in the middle of winter

One of the things that I found really tough every morning for 4 or 5 months was making the tough call on whether we are open, what temporaries to use and whether to all buggies etc.. That was done usually in the dark at 7am and I found that a constant drain.

Then add on knowing you'll get criticised whatever decision you make doesn't help either. I also like to have things planned out and a week planned in advance but, with that weather, you couldn't plan. Every day involved coming in and having a look at the course and then trying to figure out what you actually can do. It occupies a lot of you brain power and then you start to forget and miss some of the small things.

Another thing to mention is how key timing is in greenkeeping. Losing spray windows when you know you need to whether it be for nutrition or disease prevention is one of the things the conditions made so difficult with a spray when I knew that I needed to.

“Despite working on a dry site and experiencing far less rainfall than many of our fellow greenkeepers have endured across the country, the relentless wet weather has meant maintaining morale and productivity in the team has been challenging. There's only so many mornings you can head out in the dark and wet and retain the passion and enthusiasm we started out the winter with. Course condition has suffered, with loss of grass cover from saturated soils and foot traffic. Ideal conditions for moss to colonise has resulted in poor presentation and performance and increased maintenance operations and expenditure to renovate and improve surfaces.

We failed to complete all the tasks we set ourselves for the winter due to the waterlogged conditions and inability to access areas of the site with equipment. The increased reinstatement and repair tasks caused by equipment movement in wet soils is ongoing and requires financial and labour resources we have not budgeted for, impacting on our ability to present and manage the course how we wish for our members and guests. The unavoidable delays in project schedules further impact on our ability to have the course improvements in play for the beginning of the season.

In short, a long hard winter, both physically and mentally where ultimately the weather eventually won. After doing everything possible, we failed to meet our own expectations.

The team has ploughed on , and somehow maintained high spirits but summer can't come soon enough”

“In my 30 years of being a Course Manager, last year was one of the toughest by far, and had me at times scratching my head and questioning my own agronomic practices! I feel for all my fellow colleagues who are in similar positions and they should not feel alone, whether that be from the most exclusive golf club to a 9 hole pay and play, as we all want to produce the best conditions year round for our members to enjoy. Sadly, there will always be an element of golfers with unrealistic expectations and zero tolerance for anything less than perfection, irrelevant of whatever Mother Nature has thrown at us!

I fear your efforts to highlight this will simply fall on deaf ears but thank you for trying.”

“Unprecedented amounts of rainfall over the latter end of summer and winter have had a huge impact on staff and course.

We have had to plan tasks in advance like putting 100 tonnes of sand in our new bunkers on days that it didn't rain and leave it until it rains then walk out and shovel out the sand. So while it's not raining other tasks can get done and while the course is too wet for tractors the sand is already in the bunkers.

As greenkeepers, we love the love challenge but this was getting silly.

I have currently got the club to start the season a week later and extend it by two weeks into October when we have still got good strong growth. So while we are struggling with wet weather I had an extra week of recovery after a wet spring.”

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“My experience this last this past 6 months is a depressing struggle where we have seen programmes left incomplete and projects being postponed having just been beaten into submission by the relentless rain.”

“It goes without saying that this has been the most challenging period of weather, I've ever experienced in 27 years. Even on chalk that drains better than most other sub surfaces we have struggled at times to get access onto the courses. It has been the perfect storm in many ways, with high temperatures, ridiculous amounts of rainfall meaning that growth never really stopped. But the surfaces were too wet to take mowers out and to keep on top of growth.

We've also seen more disease than many other years, as available nutrition wasn't available, as it had all washed through due to rainfall. Pathway ends, high traffic areas suffered significant damage from foot traffic.

Our onsite reservoir is fed from two boreholes, in a normal year we are filling up from the end of the previous playing season to the following March. We turned the boreholes off in mid-November as naturally the reservoir had filled up. At one point in March, we had to remove some water, as the reservoir had filled with all the rain , and was starting to overflow through the overflow pipe! “

"This winter has without doubt been the most challenging weather wise I have experienced in 30 plus years of Greenkeeping . Volumes of rainfall have been extreme which has made general maintenance and winter projects more demanding than ever."

"All I can say is that the we are all in this together, because we are a turf sport that is different to football, cricket or horse racing where rain/ground conditions will stop play. I believe the mild wet winters are here to stay, so everyone associated with our great industry, work or play will have to be realistic stay focused remain positive and manage expectations."

"So the last 7 months has been the wettest weather ever recorded850 mm recorded here since October..... we were closed for 14 days but in general we were very well supported by the board and the membership. There were tensions occasionally when we had to ban buggies for safety reasons and members were starting to tire of the carry only policy.

I think the biggest issue for us is actually now when the demand is to produce a course that in the eyes of the members, should be easy because winter is now over!"

"We have experienced 1000 mm of rainfall at my course from the start of October until the end of March which is a few millimetres shy of our yearly average! This has affected our construction projects working in wet conditions, trying to get finished soil to the desired levels and also delays in turf delivery as the turf farms were struggling to harvest because of flooding in their fields.

It has also created a knock on effect with the mess we have created travelling to the site creating more work for us to make these areas to an acceptable standard now it is drying out.

Our Team has carried on regardless and has performed extremely well in tough conditions and we are very much looking forward to some kinder weather!"

"Since the start of July 2023, the last 10 months, we have experienced continuous extended periods of extreme weather conditions. Excessive rainfall (240mm more than previous year), successive storms, sustained spells of frost, snow, rain & ice, the inevitable consequence of a high-water table, not to mention two coastal clean-up operations after tidal splash/debris in November & January. All the time experiencing long spells of character and complexion changing cold winds!

Tough mentally and physically on the team who, through it all, have never wavered, delivering a standard of work and product they should be extremely proud of, but at what cost to wellbeing and morale? Morale which is understandably at its lowest at the very time of year when the playing season is eagerly anticipated by all and where once again the expectation and demand to deliver remain extremely high. The extreme challenges just keep on coming in the greenkeeping industry and, although this is acknowledged and appreciated by some within the club, it would be great to have a wider appreciation of the current challenges beyond our industry colleagues."

"The challenges of courses in dealing with continued rainfall and wet ground conditions have made normal processes of mowing and maintenance very difficult indeed. Moving equipment and using saturated construction materials can extend individual projects. Winter projects and improvement programs are impacted. As we creep deeper into the growing season members frustrations are increasing as the have become accustomed to early spring golf. Unfortunately the normal mowing practices are almost impossible to undertake especially on inland courses and those that are constructed on clay. Clay soils will usually offer a lushness for inland courses with high nutrient and water retention capabilities. Unfortunately these soil types take much longer to dry out or stabilise to allow the heavy mowing equipment onto the course. It is unfortunate that the weather is as bad as it has been, however it will change. Personally it may be advisable for clubs to re think there qualifying competitions and adapt the season based on the current conditions. Maintaining communication from clubs General managers and heads of committees is essential in maintaining support for the team tasked with presenting the golf course."

"...This winter saw the golf course close more times than ever, with trolley bans and plenty of post and rope to usher golfers away from the worst areas. Winter projects were delayed for months as access to the course was impossible. The teams morale was tested on many occasions, but coffee and biscuits got us through. Members were understanding of the predicament and could see we were giving them as much notice as possible and trying all we could. We were in a privileged position of full membership and a supportive General Manager, so financially, we didn't have to open. I am sure if this wasn't the case, the scenario would be very different."

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"Onto the weather - it's been brutal. In the three months I've been back in Scotland it's rained constantly. April average rain is 62mm we have had 110mm by 17th April. Average for the year is 250mm we are at 445mm already. Lucky to be on a links and it is coping well but we have had pumps out every day for months moving water. 22 bunkers unplayable, full of water and look like swimming pools. It's very difficult to get round the golf course and more often than not it's better to do less and create less mess. It's been cold too so very little growth. We started an apprentice in February and I've only seen his face the day we interviewed him. Everyday since it's been a big jacket, hat and snood!

When I left the south we couldn't get on a lot of areas to cut as so wet, temperatures milder there, so grass still growing and the place looks mega untidy.

Sorry for the long rant but it's not been easy. I would guess more Greenkeeper's have left the industry this winter for other jobs than ever before."

"I have accumulated some facts and figures from the dreadful, nightmare wet winter that we have just endured.

October: We had a total of 175mm of rainfall, with 13/31 dry days during the month and 144mm of the 175mm falling in the last 11 days of the month. This unfortunately set the trend and brought us into November already wet.

November: 167mm for November with 10/30 dry days.

December: 153mm for December with 8/31 dry days.

January: 107mm for January with 19/31 dry days. This month was drier but we suffered a deep freeze for around two weeks mid-month.

February: 182mm for February with 7/29 dry days.

March: 131mm for March with 8/31 dry days.

As you can see far more wet days than dry each month. In my opinion it was the wet end to October which caused the initial problem. The rainfall levels for November, December and January were high but we have had higher for these months in previous winters. It was the fact that the ground had little chance to dry out during these periods because of the amount of days when it rained. As a Course Manager I found this very problematic and much tougher than previous winters due to the daily disruption to work routines and project work. It became a damage limitation exercise in terms of managing the course and certainly not much fun.

An Agronomist's View

Alistair Beggs, Head of Agronomy, R&A Sustainable Agronomy Team

"I have spent the last couple of months visiting clubs all over the land on all kinds of soils. In addition I have my winter experiences from Royal Liverpool Golf Club where, for the first time in my golfing recollection, we have had waterlogging and flooding to an exceptional level. Our 1st hole, Practice Ground and most bunkers on the course have been flooded and out of use for large periods of the winter and spring season. Only in the last fortnight has the raised water table declined in level.

Elsewhere the pressures have been greater. Other links courses in this area have endured raised water tables, flooding and waterlogging and this has curtailed golfing and greenkeeping activities. Rainfall levels in all regions of England are close to, or have exceeded, all-time records and clubs in East Anglia, South East, Devon and Cornwall, The Midlands and The North have all been similarly affected. The heavier the soil the more devastating the impact has been.

Also, it is worth noting that DLI (Daily Light Integral) values are much lower than in previous years (lack of sunshine) compromising turf health further.

Having visited some local courses on heavier soils in the last fortnight (which has been a little drier), only now are they resuming normal greenkeeping activities. There is a lot of catching up to do!

I have to say that there are a lot of deflated greenkeepers out there at the moment. However, in most instances, there is some understanding from golfers that it will take some time for normal playing standards to be restored. There are always a few exceptions where a document like this will help (hopefully) to ease the difficulties."