

THE first three major events of the season shared something directly in common: play on a great seaside links of first-class calibre. They were the match between Oxford and Cambridge at Hunstanton, the Halford Hewitt Tournament at Deal and Royal St. George's, and the Martini £6,000 Professional Tournament at St. Andrews.

At Hunstanton, the horrible (if now almost forgotten) winter was still with us: the snow and sleet showers flew over the links on the back of a strong north easterly and the little African playing for Oxford turned slowly blue beneath his normal duskiness until someone saved

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his life with an old army greatcoat to put on over his four pullovers. It nearly came down to his ankles, which he said made it all the better.

The greens staff there had not had a chance to bring the course into any particular condition: the dressings they had put down over the greens two months before were still lying in black smudges and streaks on the surface, the spring rains not having come at all. On the whole, though, the greens putted well; and indeed at Hunstanton the local sand seems particularly favourable to fine turf. It sets easily into a smooth surface, and even when brown and bare, lets a ball roll true.

Nothing Jumpy

The same can nearly always be said for Deal and St. George's; in fact in many respects they have some of the finest greens in the world. I don't think I once saw a putt do anything jumpy or odd; and time and time again the eye and the player were alike rewarded by the sight of a long one coasting in perfect evenness of flow across the green to draw almost imperceptibly to a stop by the hole. Ten footers, hit straight, rolled straight and sharply in.

THREE BY THE SEA

There is no doubt though, particularly at St. George's, that something interesting is happening to the fairways with the years. They seem to be less dry and sandy, and are more and more developing the softer characteristics common on inland territory.

One distinguished, if somewhat rigidly traditional, ex-champion golf-writer bewails the fact that St. George's, in particular, is turning into what he calls a "cow-pasture".

But this is a matter of opinion; and perhaps the effect of years of mowing and the occasional treatment is bound to have a richening effect in the end. To almost any inland player, certainly the Sandwich fairways are still near Paradise.

Occasional Boggle

At St. Andrews, too, a number of professionals in the Martini saw some doubtfulness in the greens. With all respect to the City's municipal greens staff, and to the dry cold spring followed by sudden rain just before the tournament, which made the grass suddenly reach for the heavens in its joy, they did seem to be less true than sometimes in the past. There was a tendency for putts, if only here and there, to boggle at the sight of the hole: usually a sign either of softness or over-thickness of grass surface, both of which show their effect most strongly as the ball slows down.

For the amount of wear it gets, of course, the Old Course still remains something of a natural miracle: but there were one or two mutterings in dark corners from old gentlemen about the effects of modern mowing machinery.

In architecture, these four courses—with much superficially in common in their territory—differ most interestingly

in what they make of it. Hunstanton has perhaps the most spectacular ridge of dunes, running as high as a house from one end of the course to the other about 200 yards inland from the sandy shore and parallel to it. The holes hug the landward side, with a small stream and the lushness of genuine accredited cow-pasture on their right: then climb about on the shoulders of the range towards and around the turn, before shooting straight out to the shore at the 10th.

There, the disturbance on the adjacent bathing beach has led to sand blowing across the shore on to the green, which was still covered with a new layer, settling within the grass, as the match was played.

The same trouble has long since wiped out the old second hole at Littlehampton, and is probably a problem in many links around the coasts. Saunton, in Devon, fights a perpetual battle with battalions of marram grass planted to stabilise the vast dune country which lies between the holidaymakers' sands and the course.

Subtle difference

Deal and St. George's, separated from the shore by a huge shingle beach and ridge, have none of this to cope with (though they do get seepage of seawater at times, particularly at Deal). The nature of both is subtly different from Hunstanton. Hunstanton continues with a string of holes tacking to and fro across the flatter part of the central dune-ridge, and ends with two climbing in succession to plateau greens set on the seaward shoulder of it. Deal and St. George's, on the other hand, though blessed with some fair heights of dune, direct their holes around and in between them.

St. George's has one frightening plateau green, the 10th, with a steep drop directly all around its back edge, and huge bunkers set in the forward slopes of its sides; and Deal has one short-hole tee, the 6th, perched high on the top of a sand-hill, where players in April often find themselves needing timber to reach a green only some 150 yards away by the shore.

But in general both courses use the undulations of the between-dune country to leaven the fairways, and minor ridges and rolls to give interest to the greens.

Splendid Simplicity

There are some great holes on both. At St. George's the pattern of the testing longish holes is often a drive transversely across a minor crest of dune, with pot bunkers set nastily in its face, then a second shot along beside the range to a green protected only by bunkers. At Deal, the tendency is much more for the fairways to tack across country to greens sited either flat and open, or most testingly in hollows between the undulations. There is one splendid simple short hole, though, the 14th (between a brassie and a 4-iron) which depends on a green rising in a slight plateau, with a drop and heavy bunkers on either side, and a rough sandy track at the back.

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This is the hole where Lionel Munn, asked to hit a shot for a photographer, once borrowed a spoon and a ball and, with his jacket and hat on, holed his demonstration shot: possibly the only extant photograph of a man actually hitting an ace.

At Deal, on the 1st, as at St. Andrews, a small cross-water hazard guards the approach to the green. It is notorious at Deal how many times matches going down the 19th end by one side or the other dropping their second short in to the water, just as they do at St. Andrews into the Swilcan Burn.

Looked at in cold logic, there is no reason at all why a small water cross-hazard in front of the green should in any way affect the shot. But nearly all bad shots arise from doubt sown in the player's mind; and, at sowing doubt, water before the green is one of the most potent craftsmen imaginable.

I've run on so long now that only a paragraph remains for the tactics and strategy of the Old Course, and the trouble the Martini competitors, like all others, had with it. To speak of it so lightly would be sacrilege. So I won't. Another time, if I may. . . .