

BEEFING ABOUT BUMPS

by John Stobbs

THE Open Championship which Arnold Palmer won at Old Troon in July will go down in the records as one of the most interesting of all time. This, not only for the play itself (and the way Palmer in the end all but wiped out all opposition completely despite Kel Nagle's two sub-par rounds beside him on the final day), but also for the odd state of the course and the conditions which came with it.

The American magazine, Sports Illustrated, in a report of the event, describes Troon as follows: "*A dour, forbidding links . . . one of those eerie, unnerving British golf courses surrounded by evil dunes, vile shrubs and an atmosphere more suited to the Hound of the Baskervilles than to sport . . . The Fairways are narrow, splotched with steep-sided bunkers that look like moon craters and burned brown by one of Scotland's worst droughts . . . the rough is full of those bushes that are as prickly as the Scots conscience: varieties of spiny broom and an impenetrable menace called whin.*" Well, that's how their correspondent saw it! In point of fact, in some ways Troon was rather easier than usual, in that the rough was hardly grown at all and—certainly by traditional standards—the gorse was kept well back and under control.

Champion's plan

What was true, though, was that the course was as dry as tinder and the fairways hard, fast, and, as a result, bumpy. It was this, more than anything else, which seemed to frighten the foreigners—all except Palmer. Palmer studied it all carefully, decided how best to play each hole, set out to do so, and did so. His four performances at the 11th—where even the U.S.A. Open Champion, Nicklaus was terrified into taking a 10—were models of absolute consistency of aim and pattern. A drive (three times with a 1-iron, twice with a spoon) across the scrub country to exactly the right spot in the fairway, five yards or so short of the aligning gorse: then a long iron banged up towards the railway with a slight hook on it to curve up towards the green and run into the heart of it.

This was not just high golfing intelligence and confidence; it was the absolute courage and mastery of his game.

Where lesser men beefed and grumbled about good drives bumping into the rough, and consistent scoring being impossible, Palmer ruthlessly proved what nonsense they were talking with his 71, 69, 67, 69: 207.

Test of golf

He also proved, incidentally, if one stopped to think about it, that we in these islands have no reason whatsoever to be in any way ashamed or doubtful about our sort of championship golf, played on rolling seaside courses, often fraught with penal hazards, and to greens which have to be seduced a little bit more subtly—or at least craftily—than by the transatlantic-type here-welcome-and-hold-it sort of approach. One can even hang quite proudly on to the notion that it is really the best sort of golf in the world—as I think it is. Who on earth really wants to reduce golf to a laid-on practice ground exercise, which is what a lot of tournaments are over in the States, and are beginning to be on some inland courses in this country! Let the championship links variations through-the-green last for ever, and may they never be less difficult, less puzzling, and less fraught with evil possibilities (particularly in a wind).

There is, after all, only one thing in a course absolutely essential to good golf. It is not, as some people have been trying to tell us, that all the greens should hold a demonstration up-in-the-air pitch shot like glued felt. On the contrary, it is that once the player has got the ball on to the green somehow—anyhow he likes or has the wit to!—then he should be able to feel absolutely secure that the ball will roll true to the putt. He deserves to be sure that it shall not joggle or screw about: and that there shall be no unfairly deceptive variations of pace from one green to the next.

Up to the green, the sky and land alike are open to him, with thirteen clubs to use them. He is at complete liberty to make the ball fly how and where he likes. But once he is on the green he is absolutely powerless to do anything but roll the wretched little ball across the ground. The sky is no longer his limit; his only limit is in his own courage, nerve and skill—plus the simple mechanical performance of the turf, as it has been prepared.

If any moral comes out of the Championship at Old Troon, it is that no decent golfer need ever beef about the impossibility of the ground between tee or green; for it is the same for everyone and he is at liberty to craft out his way however he likes. If the putting is fair once he gets there—then it's up to him to think, and play: not moan and run away.

Greenkeepers' problems

Greenkeepers, beset as they so often are by fatuous complaints about the rough being unfair here and there, or one thing and another being wrong, disgraceful, untidy, idiotic, or utterly bad between tee and apron, can hardly be blamed if occasionally—seeking, as we all do, a life without strife and some measure of independence and peace of mind—they tend to explode to themselves that the blighters can't expect us to do everything at once, and if that's all they care about, well then. It must be tempting for many a man to turn a blind eye for the moment to his greens, in an attempt to give his time and attention to keeping the more wretched members quiet. It leads to no peace of mind in the end, though; because if there's

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one topic they'll all start blinding and bellyaching about in no time—if they have the slightest or remotest cause—it's the greens, of course.

Whatever one's views and feelings about putting (and mine are unprintable) greens are the one part of a course that can decisively make or mar the golf it has in it: and the man who looks after them has more claim that any other to be recognised—and perhaps occasionally harried—as the V.I.P. of golf.

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