

COURSES IN PLAY—II

THE OPEN

by John Stobbs

THIS year's Open, in all its excitement up to the tie and play off between Bob Charles and Phil. Rodgers, illustrated two things about how the state of a course can affect play. Both are the sort of thing which can have general application to any club running any event, or even its normal week-end golf.

First was the rough. More than most seaside sandy links-type courses, Royal Lytham and St. Annes tends towards lushness. There are many fairly low places upon the course; and there, where rough is undisturbed on a wet summer like this one, the growth can be not just long but thick, too. Although this only applied in certain places, notably along the 11th, and beside the long 7th, the rough generally had been allowed to grow in, so that the fairways were narrowed to just the right amount for a championship of the stature this one was obviously going to have.

Even where the grass itself was not lush at all, but fine fescue, it grew tall; and the tough seed-bents standing up in it in thick array could have quite an effect upon a club trying to swing through them. Any sort of try at a long shot out of it was often chancy in the extreme, and even a niblick shot could be edged off course by the sheer resistance of the bents to the club. They tended to wrap round the shank. Even some of the top half-dozen players in the final order found shots coming out of rough one side only to fly at an angle into the rough the other.

This illustrated, I thought, two things. First, how very effective psychologically this simplest of all hazards can be. Although its maintenance costs are pretty well nil, its effect upon play, and most of all upon the player before he hits a shot, can be out of all proportion to the actual difficulty he finds if he goes into it. Often, at Lytham, the ball lay

fairly clear and a more or less normal stroke to the green was possible for the class player. But the point was that he didn't know it would be till he got there. 250 paces of anxiety are a hazard in themselves. So the threat of the rough became the threat of the worst lie he was quite likely to find; and the high bents all the way along spared him no reminder of it as he took his last look down the hole before swinging at the ball.

Where courses grow short in summer, and, more often nowadays, where the fairway mower has tended to edge out gradually with the years, widening fairways and often straightening out their edges, a hole may be given new interest and challenge again, simply by reviewing the margin of the mowing pattern, and letting in a curve or corner of rough at a tactical point on the hole. No one will lose a ball there; but everyone will see it and have his play affected, especially if it hazards the evasive line from some permanent hazard of the hole, like a bunker or a clump of trees.

Up to Scratch

The other thing noticeable at Lytham was how well some people can putt on greens not at their best. Lytham had suffered like the rest of the Lancashire coast courses from the foul winter; and there must have been many anxious moments during the spring for Head Greenkeeper Marshall and his men. They had done the very best they could to bring them up to scratch for the Open; and (obviously by looking at them) had given them a slightly lower trim for the occasion. On the whole it worked; but the dank weather and the pounding of many spiked feet did naturally leave some of them a little less than their best smoothness round the holes by the last day. And, of course, nothing much could be done about patches where the grass had not yet fully recovered its natural body and evenness. Pins could avoid these patches; but they still had to be putted over.

Despite all this, the ball did roll rather than merely bumble on them; and the decisive answer to one or two professionals who complained about them

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came from Bob Charles in the play-off at the very end of the week. It is doubtful if any like occasion has seen such a masterly and almost magical putting. Charles had the pace of the greens measured to a tiddle; and again and again that final day you could see the ball clearly going into the hole some six feet before it got there!

"On the Up"

Perhaps it is Charles' manner of striking which did the trick. He uses a stiff-wristed putting stroke; and, I think, hits them slightly "on the up", to start them off in the natural rolling spin. It was perhaps evidence that this counted, when for once—at the 12th on the Saturday afternoon—his tee shot finished beyond the flag against an edge of semi-rough, so that he had to chop down at the ball slightly with his putter. This was the only putt one saw from him that ran unevenly, staying well short from only some 15 feet; it, in fact, cost him three putts.

The other point of major interest at Lytham was the effect of the new tees. The most successful was generally reckoned, I'd say, to be that for the short 12th. It not only lengthened it from a medium iron to a long iron; but it vastly increased the visual challenge of the hole. There are some sharp little pit bunkers before the right hand side of the green. They always menace the shot; but from the new tee, which is angled from considerably further to the right, they positively snarled at the player on the tee—especially with the pin placed arrogantly just behind them as it was.

Entirely Fair

One can hazard the opinion that the new 12th tee would make it one hell of a hole, but still entirely fair, to any reasonable club player. This, though, is something Royal Lytham will no doubt be testing by experience in future.

The lengthening of the 17th is a different matter. This makes it two long hard shots to the best of professionals. Indeed on the Friday I watched Tom Haliburton hit a really sound stroke from the tee—good enough for applause—and only just reach the fairway!

Perhaps the fairway might well have been mown back a bit further than it was; but in any case a hole which had always been a challenge to the nerves was made by the change into a real man's hole in every way. Even for the longest hitters the second shot became a wood or long-iron flighted blind over the Jones country and the sandhills beyond, with a little bunker awaiting any nearly straight shot pitching just left of the stick.

It was this hole—where he hit a long iron on Friday afternoon so perfectly and so straight that it flew past the pin and ran over the bank at the back—that cost Nicklaus the championship. Even to the highest class of player, the longer version of the 17th means that even the best player in the world can no longer simply wham a decisive shot straight at the flag.

Demands Thought

Of course, the 17th always needed to be played with the head; but it can now be said to call forth both the best of striking and the coolest of thinking, and calculation of safety against risk.

The new back tee for the long 11th, rather a dull hole at present running straight up to a bunkered green between long lines of rough on either side—was rejected by the players as just too far back for the fairway available. This does not mean that it should be scrapped. The hole might very easily make a magnificent professional's par-5 if the fairway was widened and dropped back a bit on the right for the tee shot, leaving the huge obstructing bunker still challenging the shortest line; then the second half of the fairway could perhaps be bellied a bit towards the left and the rough brought in a bit from the right to give the hole more shape, tighten the pitch into the green, and tempt the man driving to gain length by playing as near the big bunker as he dares.

Somehow to see Charles playing it cannily in 4, with two woods straight up the middle of the avenue, as it were, and then a chip straight up on to and across the green to the flag, made it look a little less angry and obstructive than perhaps it should be next time the Open goes to Lytham.