ON THE COURSE

Enville has a long term improvement plan

John Lelean visits a Staffordshire gem where the hospitality is matched by the surroundings

One of life's great enjoyments is to combine business with pleasure and although some of our readers might insist the labours of a golf journalist are just one long round of pleasure, unfortunately this is not always the case.

There are exceptions and a visit to Enville Golf Club in the West Midlands certainly fell into this category. My own club at Wetherby, through our past Captain John Fitton, has struck up a rewarding relationship with Enville, where we play a twelve aside team on a home and away basis. We go there in April, they come to us in September, with overnight accommodation of course. There is no way anyone is going to drive home after a surfeit of such extra-ordinary hospitality!

Enville must be one of the best kept secrets in British golf. Mention the name outside a 50 mile radius of Stourbridge and no one has heard of it. We all hope it stays that way.

For your ears only, and I trust greenkeepers will keep the news in the family, it is 36 holes of classic golfing country, carved out of pine forest and developed into a predominately heathland course.

The two courses, inter changeable when necessary for maintenance work, are the Highgate and the Lodge. The Highgate is longer, 6451 yards with a SSS of 72, the Lodge, slightly shorter at 6207 yards, SSS 70, but by general agreement much tighter, with some outstanding holes.

The Head Greenkeeper is John Palmer, who has been on the staff since 1972 and succeeded to the top job some 18 months ago. He runs the course with eight full time staff. Two of the younger greensmen have completed the first and second year stages of the City & Guilds equivalent at Elmwood College in Scotland, but are continuing a block release for the third year module. "We have not done a great deal of training in the past, but this is changing", said John Palmer. "During the winter we have had workshop training on our various items of equipment. The Agriculture Training Board sent in a mechanic to train staff on tractor maintenance and a dealer from Derby Instructed staff on mower maintenance and the Kohler engines".

"Two have also been away on a chainsaw safety course. This year we serviced four machines ourselves at a cost of only £250 each and this saved the club a great deal of money".

The club subscribed to the STRI and the Bingley based agronomist, David Stansfield visits regularly to check progress and offer advice. "We view his recommendations more as a guideline than a tablet of stone", added John. "I don't believe it is practicable to work to a three year programme. There are too many factors to take into consideration such as the weather, the amount of play the courses receive in a year and most essential the money we have available".

"To achieve what I have set out to do could take two years, three years or even five. If the job is done correctly the courses will come right but in their own time".

Capital expenditure at Enville is now planned five years ahead, based on the assumption that machinery in constant use will last about five years before the cost of spares makes them uneconomic to retain.

John Palmer, conscious of running costs, plans to replace all the petrol driven machinery with diesel over the next six years and that includes his triplex mowers. He already has one diesel Toro GM with goomer units and says the improvement in the putting surface has been quite remarkable, despite the fact he is no longer cutting at the previous club policy of one eighth throughout the summer season.

"This was too low", said John. "The bents and fescues were struggling and only the poa could survive. Now cutting at 3/16ths or higher the goomer units have increased the green speed considerably".

Similarly, to encourage good growth he has reduced the pH from 7.0 two years ago to about 5.8 by applying nitrogen. This he believes is about the level to maintain otherwise his finer grasses could be adversely affected.

Asked to identify his main problems, John was quite definite; drainage and thatch. He said he was now working to a much stricter slitting programme for the greens, tining down to 6 inches, verti-cutting regularly and hollow tining to one inch centres. The verti-drain used last year broke through the pan and now root growth is down to 9 inches and he is aiming at eleven.

The day we played the course John was hollow tining and had not top dressed, but although there appeared to be more holes than green, no one complained because the puts still ran reasonably true.

When the top dressing is applied it is a 70:30 mix of sand and Ferronite on the principle that a little and often is far more beneficial than a once a year heavy dosage. A top dressing of pure sand is used in the Autumn only.

He gives the greens a feed of seaweed extract and liquid iron and has cut out granular feeding completely.

During the winter, in common with most courses he had a couple of outbreaks of fusarium and treated with a Mascot Contact Fungicide. Next year he will probably vary the product, not because it was unsuccessful, but to ring the changes so the disease does

One of Enville's most spectacular holes, the 16th on the Highgate Course
not become immune to a specific treat-
ment. Mechanical aeration is also the policy
for the fairways. John recalled that
when he joined Enville in 1972, the
fairways were so thin on grass cover
that they were mown just once a month.
Now due to regular winter slitting and
verti-cutting the sward has thickened
to require cutting weekly during the
season.
Although this has created extra work,
the finer grasses have become domi-
nant, there is less need to digout and
weeds have been almost eliminated.
Fairway aeration is also helping his
other problem - drainage. There are a
number of water catchment areas on
the course that come into play and
these will need lifting and draining
into one of the numerous streams that
criss cross the fairways. Because the
course was developed out of wood-
land, rather than agricultural land
very few drains were already in exis-
tence. Trees soaked up the rain water
and the surplus ran off into the ditches.
As most greenkeepers now find, the
areas laid out for tees at Enville are
proving to be far too small for the
amount of all year play that his courses
receive. To overcome the problems
created by excessive wear, last winter
John added length or width to five tees
and has ten more planned for increase
in the future.
The fashion in the 1960’s to have two
tier tees, when the backs were only
used for weekend competitions has
created considerable difficulties with
both wasted ground and awkward
maintenance. John has already
started to level off his tees, but en-
countered one big snag at his fifth hole
when he discovered the elevated layer
was built on sandstone and it had to
be broken up with a JCB.
He is now aiming to have around 600
square yards of teeing ground for all
the short holes, though the course
layout causes certain restrictions on
some holes. Spreading the wear is the
only answer and this is achieved by
moving the markers daily.
Bunkers are the least of his worries.
He uses Moneystone White from
Cheshire, has no mechanical bunker
raker, just manual raking on Mon-
days and Fridays with encouragement
to the members to keep them tidy.
A neat idea seen at Enville were their
moveable bridges. Instead of a fixed
bridge across the fairway streams
concentrating wear to a focal point,
the wooden structure, wide enough to
pull a golf cart can be moved by two
men a yard to the left or right on a
weekly basis.
They are easy to construct from two
base timbers of equal length, tapered
at either end with a high point in the
middle. Slats are nailed across the
two beams to form an attractive
humped back design. The structure is
strengthened with stretchers and lifting
struts at either end.
As to the future? John Palmer sees his
primary objective bringing the greens
to perfection for all year round golf and
that means a continuous programme
of slitting, tining, coreng and verti-
draining.
At some time the irrigation system
installed in 1972 will need up dating,
but this is likely to involve a major
capital project.
Meanwhile my club have already made
plans to welcome the Captain and his
team from Enville in September and
we in turn are anticipating our return
to the West Midlands in 1990.
I might then be tempted to give you an
update on how John Palmer is getting
on, though this is dependent on
whether I make the team. If the im-
provement in my game matches the
promises given by our professional
when he sold me my new clubs, then
read these columns next year!

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