

# WALTER WOODS

St. Andrew's Links Superintendent

## The Preparation of a CHAMPIONSHIP COURSE

What makes a great championship course? I doubt very much if it's length, when you consider that Ian Woosnam, Sandy Lyle and Seve Ballesteros can hit the ball well over 300 yards off the tee. Perhaps it's character. That is a possibility, when you see the ruggedness of Royal St. George's or the serenity of Turnberry. Then it might be beauty, such as St. Andrews at evening when shadows are at their longest.

Fred Hawtree, the Golf Course Architect and one of the foundation stones of the British Greenkeepers Association, once remarked "A Golf Course is made famous not by what is there, but rather by what happened there". If you study his remarks you will be able to analyse his logic.

There is an abundance of great courses throughout Britain - Hollinwell, Woodhall Spa, Blairgowrie, Hunstanton or Gleneagles are a few examples. Unfortunately geographical location dictates their suitability or lack of it. Such questions as:- is an airport located in close proximity; has the course access by road and rail; is there sufficient car parking; is sufficient space available for a tented village, are all part and parcel of organising today's tournaments.

Last year we watched Oakland Hills and Augusta on television. We envied the ability of their Superintendents, Ted Weorhle and Bill Fuller. We admired the excellence they produced. However, we too could acquire this excellence, if we constructed our Golf Courses in Botanic Gardens and made costs so prohibitive that only a few could play. For us golf has become a national sport, accepted by the public as a recreational game, which anyone can play at a reasonable cost.

Club Management is well aware of "pounds and pence". This virtually dictates that courses be played, on normal greens and tees, for as many days as possible throughout the year. Championships are also important. They project the courses that they are played upon. They also promote the game of golf and encourage a large manufacturing industry in golf and golf related products.

Great players from around the world acknowledge that the traditional British golf course has stood the test of time. If golfing skill is to be encouraged, it is essential that Green Staff maintain surfaces in a traditional manner, while making use of modern science and technology.

The "OPEN", is the ultimate golf championship and provides the greenkeeper with an opportunity to present his course in the best possible playing condition, taking into account the delicate balance of history, golfing records and modern ability, coupled with traditional fast fiery surfaces.

A well managed championship course will always be kept in reasonable order, working at 70% efficiency and requiring only 30% more effort to have it in peak tournament condition.

Walter Woods is the Links Superintendent for the four courses at St. Andrews, the Old Course, the New Course, the Eden and the Jubilee. He is a long standing member of the BGGA, and an honorary member of the GCSAA. This year as well as being the Director of Education for SIGGA he has taken on the mantle of President. An accomplished speaker, he has lectured in the United States and Canada, on the maintenance and history of British Golf Courses.



Walter Woods instructs his apprentice on the 18th green

When Mr. Keith MacKenzie, past Secretary to the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, approached Muirfield to accept the 'Amateur' at short notice, he asked Shaig Logan the Head Greenkeeper how long it would take him to prepare the course. Shaig replied, quite seriously, "Would two weeks be too long Sir?"

To prepare for the "OPEN" takes a little longer, however, and the R&A would normally approach the venue concerned some 2 or 3 years in advance. Once arrangements have been made the Greenkeeper will organise his work schedules for each area, taking into account even the smallest detail.

### FAIRWAYS

There is no precise definition in the Rules of Golf for the term 'fairway'. The term 'through the green' encompasses both the fairway and rough.

Density, uniformity, smoothness and firmness are the components of quality fairways. Jack Nicklaus, Lee Trevino, Tom Watson and many more great players advocate short, uniform grass and firm surfaces. The firmer the surface the more backspin they can apply, making the game, more of judgement and control.

Links fairways are regarded as terrain which God provided for golf. The undulations and mounds, the bounce and roll test a player's character. Maintaining these surfaces can be equally demanding, sometimes even exasperating, to the greenkeeper. To create uniformity, everywhere should be equal, yet mounds and high spots dry out quickly, while hollows receive water and become soft and lush encouraging larger divots.

Aeration is divided into categories: hollow-coring, verti-draining, and slitting. Sand is spread in the hollows and fen peat onto the higher areas. Overseeding takes place annually with particular attention paid to weak areas or spectator routes - with strong creeping red fescue cultivated into existing grasses, and these areas protected by post and rope.

Prior to the tournament, fairways are made narrower by allowing the semi-rough to grow, then they are cut back in areas dictated by the championship committee. After the tournament they are reinstated as soon as possible to their original state, which is necessary to speed up play, to cater for the thousands of amateurs from all over the world who want to play at St. Andrews.

Picture courtesy Ransomes



## BUNKERS

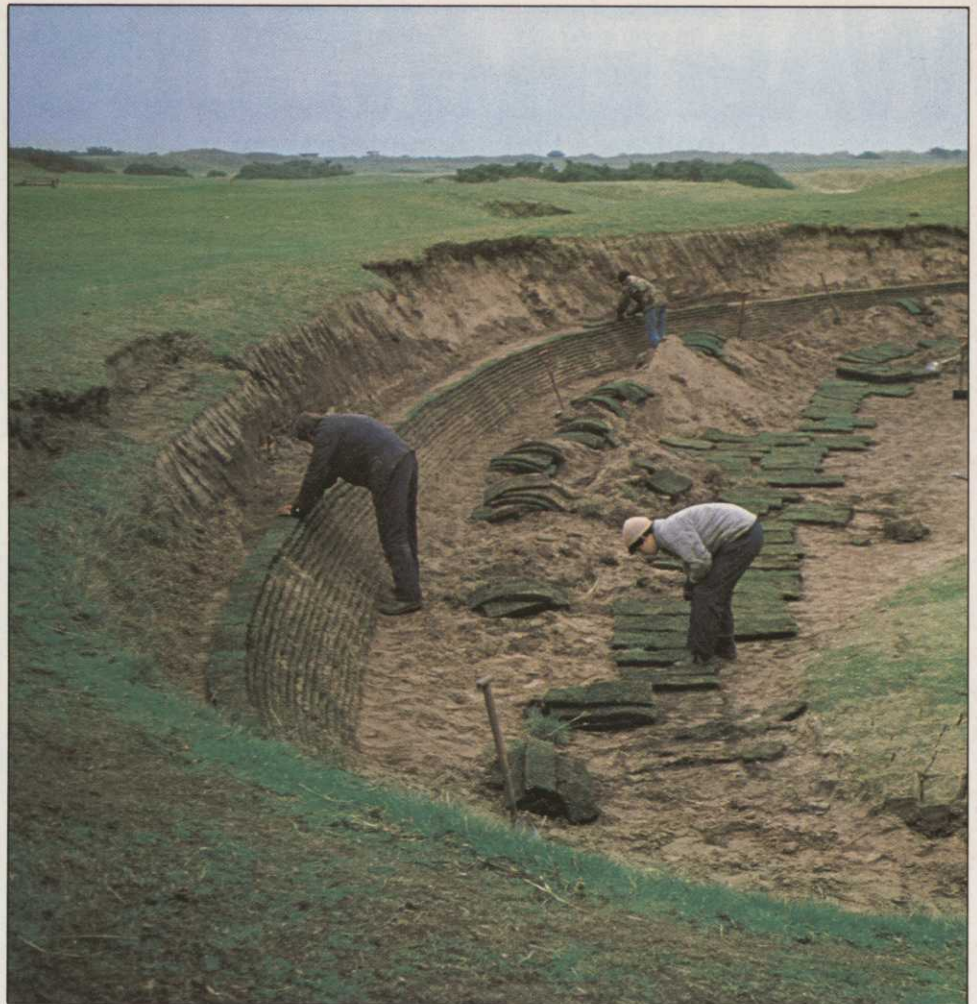
Bunkers are a feature of St. Andrews - copied all over the world - sometimes unsuccessfully. Bunker facing or revetment is a skilled job adding character to the course. The deep, frightening faces, which confront the wayward golfers, are constructed in such a fashion to prevent sand blowing away. All of the bunkers are named, Hell Bunker, Cockle, the Principal's Nose, Beardies and the Road Hole Bunker, each has played its part in history, the latter being no exception. Doug Sanders pitched out dead, for his four in 1970 only to three putt the last, then lose out in the play-off the following day. Tommy Nakajima, the Japanese golfer, after leading in the 3rd round of the 1978 championship, took five shots and finished with a nine - five over par. Some of the locals have renamed this bunker "Nakajima Sand".

## TEES

Tees are maintained exactly as greens, adopting the same method of maintenance. They are aerated, fertilised, irrigated, top-dressed, and scarified in a similar fashion.

We have ladies, forward mens, competition and tournament tees. Tee positions and pin locations are organised to constantly change the walking-off routes. Regularly, tournament tees are firmed up by allowing the public to play on a rotation basis. Fescue and bent grass is encouraged, allowing lower cutting heights similar to those for Greens.

During any tournament our first tee is used as a practice putting green area to allow competitors a few putts to relieve tension before they tee off.



**Above:** Bunker facing or revetment is a skilled job. The deep faces are constructed to stop sand blowing away.

**Below:** The fourth green at St. Andrews looking over the town.



## GREENS

Most criticism is reserved for greens. Although greens represent only about 2% of the golf course area, they play a role in 75% of all golf strokes, assuming a par round. Any professional golfer scoring par rounds would be well down the money league. So putting is the area which separates the men from the boys.

Good quality greens are the most important part of the golf course. Greens receive more discussion in the clubhouse than any part of the course. More golfers blame greens rather than their own ability. How many times have you heard the comments 'The greens are too slow', 'The greens are too bumpy'.

The finest quality greens I have ever seen and ones which would immediately suit championships are Muirfield, Gullane, Elie, Kilspindie, Sunningdale and the Merion in Philadelphia. What do all these greens have in common? The answer is that they contain a large amount of fescue and bent grass. Why the Merion and not Augusta - simply because of the climate. Augusta's greens are total Pencross Bent and require warm temperatures to survive. The Merion, with a similar climate to Britain, is maintained with traditional British greenkeeping methods and although a relatively short course, it promotes skill rather than relying on green speed only.





Championship greens can only be kept for short periods. To expect perfect greens every day of the year is asking the impossible. Good greens are expected and great greens should be appreciated. Never can the greenkeeper explain his ability to the members. For like most things it is taken for granted. Golfers everywhere fail to understand the frustration of aeration or top-dressing or why pin positions are kept deliberately on the perimeter of the greens. Fine grass playing surfaces can change from one season to another and require constant attention.

Once we are informed that we are to receive the Open Championship I allow the year before to work to my advantage. It provides an excellent opportunity to prepare for the following year. During the summer I would deliberately keep fertiliser to a minimum and if applied it would be to experiment with timing for use prior to the tournament the following year.

Artificial watering would also be kept to a minimum, with the philosophy that a good drought will get rid of any undesirable grass which might be present. If any grass colour is required one way to achieve this would be to apply Sulphate of Iron.

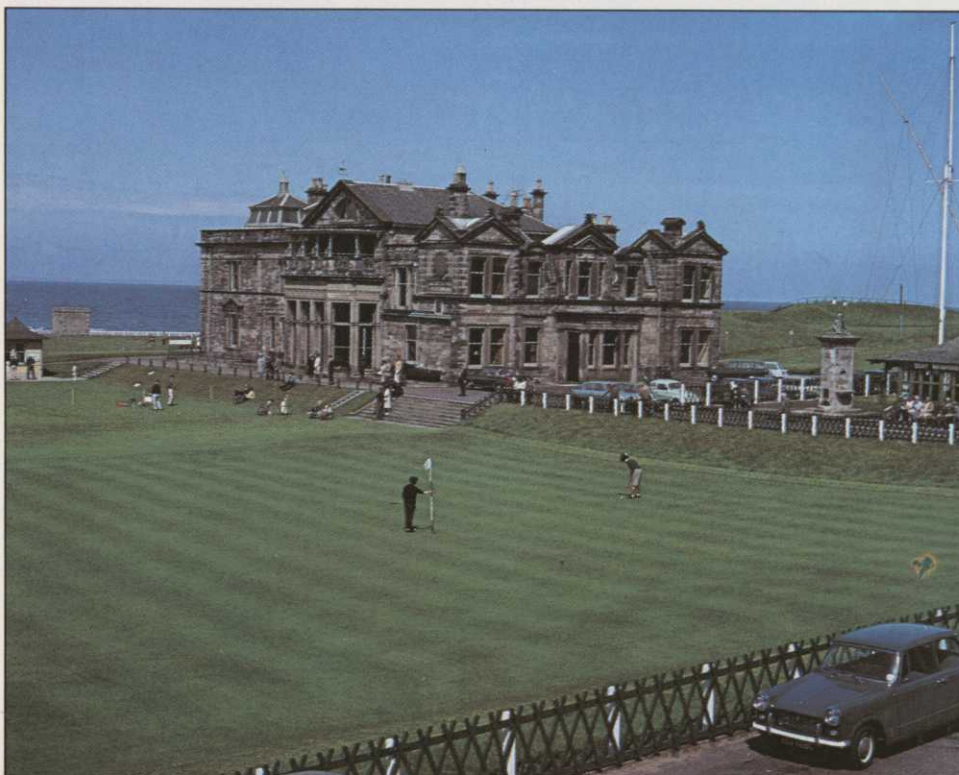
**Above:** *If we constructed our golf courses in Botanic Gardens such as Augusta few could afford to play.*

Aeration would also be more intensive, followed with sandy top dressings and in the event of some of the weaker grasses dying these would be replaced with grass which will succeed. This can be achieved in the Autumn by plugging with a 6 inch diameter hole cutter and replacing with suitable turf from the Turf Nursery. One particular green at St. Andrews has received over 10,000 of these turfs over the last 10 years. This treatment might appear drastic but it is successful. Over the winter months it does not take long for it to blend into the surrounding grasses.

### **Bent and fescue will provide a much better density of grass texture**

Bent and fescue are tolerant and once established will provide a much better density of grass texture, uniform and smooth and from then on less expensive to keep. The 'playability' factor will also improve with more trueness of ball roll. Resilience or bite will be discovered and less plug marks will be noticed.

Winter months are critical. The weather can assist or oppose you. Aeration, bunker and turf repairs should all be completed early. Spring quickly approaches and nothing should be attempted that will disrupt the surfaces. Delegation of duties will be necessary to allow you to operate and concentrate on the course.



**Left:** *The 18th green and the headquarters of the R&A.*

*The 1st tee duals as a practice putting green prior to the major tournaments.*



Most of the contractors will arrive at this time. First to appear will be the stand erectors. Nineteen or twenty stands, which contain seating capacity for over seventeen thousand people daily, have to be erected at prime viewing locations around the perimeter of the course. Next to arrive will be the telephone, electricity and water companies. Miles of pipe and cables have to be ploughed underground. To accompany them will be television, fencing contractors, plumbers and joiners. Each day involves meetings to provide them with available routes and information so that they can conduct their own particular operation in harmony and eliminate fear of extensive damage.

### **Fertiliser can be applied to the greens and tees at the first sign of growth**

The first sign of growth allows an opportunity to spread fertiliser to greens and tees. Organic liquid feeding through the sprayer can commence to fairways and semi-roughs. Irrigate more regularly if the weather gets warm. The intention now is to create grass cover using discretion. Growth is necessary to repair aeration and turfing marks. It will also allow maintenance duties such as the application of light top-dressings every two or three weeks without smothering. Verticutting, particularly the flat areas should work hand in glove with top-dressings. Regular rolling with the heavier tee mowers fitted with smooth rollers will be required to firm up the top surface.

Weedkilling takes place in every area when sunny weather permits, particularly patches of clover which might exist in the semi-roughs. Greens usually require two applications to eliminate broad and small leaved weeds such as Daisies or Mouse-eared Chickweed. Chemicals have a knocking or stressful effect on the grass so special care should be taken with timing. Constant supervision and written instructions will be important to eliminate human mistakes.

Watering agents can be added with the weedkiller when applied to the greens and this will assist the grass to stand up to more prolonged periods without water.

Hole positions during this period can be located around the perimeter of the greens with the intention of saving the ideal locations until required. Sand screened through a fine mesh will be placed into the bunkers well in advance, firmed up and constantly raked to ensure no lips or edges are apparent.

Fertiliser is again applied to greens and tees approximately 5 weeks before the event. Timing is essential to have the fertiliser well past its peak. Better putting surfaces are a reality when the turf is on the lean and hungry side.

If Triplexes are used, daily checks, morning and evening, to hydraulic hoses and joints are essential - the last thing you want is oil spillage or petrol leaks. Hold your course back during this period, just like a jockey with his racehorse waits for the last furlong and sight of the winning post.

Occasionally, cut with pedestrian mowers set at around 3/16ths of an inch to allow for the bedding-in of the cylinders and blades. Two weeks before the tournament you will begin to realise the benefit of your past work and the efforts of your staff. No motivation is necessary - they are just as keen and equally proud of the course. Turn off your irrigation system with the intention of allowing surfaces to dry out. Then only water lightly with discretion if temperatures are high.

Give greens the last verti-cut then remove Triplexes altogether. Reduce the height of cut down a fraction on pedestrian mowers then start cutting the greens once per day.

### **The press will be inviting comments to create a sensational story**

This is when the professionals arrive to practice. They will be more relaxed and will be liable to make comments. The Press will be present and they will invite remarks hoping to create a sensational story. Cut everything, which will promote tidiness - the sides of your tee banks and around bunkers to encourage the ball to roll into the middle rather than lodge on the edge. Reduce the cutting height of your fairway mowers. If they have steel wheels have a spare set of rubber tyred wheels on stand-by. In the event of very hot drying weather steel wheels will leave unsightly scorch marks.

Receive short and long term weather forecasts. The evening before the tournament remember to switch off the electric to your irrigation systems - it would really be chaotic if the pop-ups came on during play. Give each of the greens a light brush then cut them in two opposite directions. Cut them again the following morning and from then on twice daily, morning and evening. Day to day decisions will be required however regarding speed in the event of wind. A Stimpmeter can be a valuable tool to measure the speed and create uniformity throughout the 18 greens (plus your practice green). Some greens might require extra cutting and brushing; some might require less cutting - at least it gives a measure of uniformity of putting speed.

Hole locations will be decided each morning - usually at dawn. The Championship Chairman accompanied by the Head Greenkeeper will decide on the best pin positions taking the weather into account. No tricky positions are necessary. Once selected, the hole is extracted and the cup inserted at least three quarters of an inch below the grass surface. Loose grass around the perimeter of the hole is then trimmed with scissors. After completion the immediate area is firmed up by pressing on a board and the earth part painted with a quick drying paint.

**On the second day of the Championship you can relax..... but keep out of the way!**

Over the next few days the course will be abused with machinery. Fairway mowers will almost be cutting roots

and scalping mounds. Greens will quickly deteriorate under the stress of cutting and rolling. Skilled cutting operators will be required to cut using instinct; cutting lines will be difficult to see or read. The mechanics will be busy with minor repairs to mowers and damage created by traffic. All the Head Greenkeeper has to do is co-ordinate, mainly to reduce panic when things go wrong.

After the second day of the championship you can relax. The professionals will be too busy concentrating on how to score. Keep well out of the way - all you have to do now is pray for dry, breezy weather.

To produce a quality course where fairways and tees are cut and attended daily and greens cut twice per day is a luxury few clubs can afford, but by careful budgeting and good management of resources there is no reason why quality conditions should be denied. In the wake of the event and resulting from the television exposure which the course has enjoyed visitors will arrive and more than financially compensate for any extra expenditure incurred or revenue lost.

After the tournament is finished all that remains is history. The winner's name will be mentioned regularly, he will become financially secure - and he certainly deserves to. But there will be many losers and the Greenkeeper will probably be among them. He too will be rich, but not financially, only in the knowledge and satisfaction that what he accomplished took more skill and effort than that of all the players put together.

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