

At times like this, greenkeepers are the unsung heroes...

By Jim Arthur

BEFORE every major golf event, there is much discussion by golf writers and the golfing public on likely winners and debates about form but, it seems to me, never very much thought about the condition of the hosting courses.

Head greenkeepers who have sweated blood, contended with appalling weather and tried to keep their golfers happy while turning their courses inside out in preparation for a championship or tournament rarely earn a line in golf correspondents' reports (though there are honourable exceptions).

And unless there is a disaster of flooded greens or putting surfaces like rice puddings, we all too often get the meaningless ritual of those who win saying they have never played on better greens and those who do not blaming the condition of the course for their failure. You cannot, of course, please everyone, but it would be nice to please a few more occasionally!

The Open Championship is no exception. In the dozen years I have been responsible to the Championship Committee of the Royal and Ancient for advice on the condition or presentation of a very limited number of links courses and the qualifying courses, I have had to suffer (generally in silence!) criticisms of courses because they were too dry or too wet, or too burnt up or too lush and green.

Only rarely, as at Turnberry in 1977, has the golfing press—after initially throwing every brickbat they could think of at the R&A for selecting the course—unstintingly praised the final result of three years demanding work by the head greenkeeper and his staff, which turned an over-fertilised and drought-ravaged course back to the superb links MacKenzie Ross so lovingly restored after war-time devastation.

Yet all these commentators who fill the air and pages of print with their observations and criticisms seem to miss the whole point of the exercise—namely, that the weather is the most important and uncontrollable factor in the Open Championship.

I well remember Muirfield in 1980. In early June that year, I was informed by Keith MacKenzie, in no uncertain terms, that the whole course was burnt to a frazzle—"all the holes playing par 3"—and that we needed emergency watering. Both the

head greenkeeper and I were unimpressed. Nature always repays its debts weatherwise and we had had many weeks of unbroken drought. The only argument was when that drought would break and for how long the resultant rain would last.

Experience, again, proved a wise teacher: A few days later, the rains came, the whole course greened up in less than a week and it rained for the next six weeks.

One correspondent no longer welcome at Muirfield insisted repeatedly that too much fairway watering had been carried out—overlooking the fact that there are no pop-ups even on the greens and no way to water fairways at Muirfield.

Similarly, at Sandwich, we are constantly being told that too much watering had been carried out in 1981 with the then newly installed fairway watering system. In fact, after the initial testing in spring, the pop-ups were hardly used, but we had 2½in of rain in the days before the Open! Overwatering, yes, but it came from the heavens! All that the fairways ever get at Royal St George's in a severe drought is 15 minutes twice a week with RK90 pop-ups.

Hopefully, at St Andrews, as the culmination of many years of hard work by Walter Woods and his staff and a great deal of discussion on methods and objectives, we shall see some real links golf, with fast running fairways, tight lies and very firm, but yet resilient greens, on which a good player can still stop the ball. Hopefully, there will be none of the lushness that enabled players at some previous Open Championships to come out of semi-rough and plummet a ball into soft holding greens and still stay on.

If only those who can so easily reach the golfing public could realise that we play the best golf on fine textured fescue and Agrostis turf and not on colour.

Television has done much for golf—not all of it good—and, sadly, there has been too much attention to colour and too little to the preparation of firm fast greens. Better to have rather dry or bleached greens, which may not be a dark lush green, but remain playable whatever the rainfall,

than unaerated ones, which flood when neighbouring courses are dry. But to listen to some commentators, you would not think so.

Hopefully, this Open will be something special to watch and the conditions may well vary each day, but only due to the weather and not to artificial irrigation. I would like to hear commentators pay a little thought and homage to those who have worked so hard since the moment the last Open finished on their course to make sure that this one is really true links golf and not some pretty painted green turf lushed up for television.

It would be nice to think that many chairmen or convenors of green committees would learn by watching shots being stopped on firm greens when properly struck, but that those from semi-rough were properly penalised by greens too firm to plug and pitch mark and where absence of imparted back spin would result at best in a very long putt back.

I think it is a sad commentary on competitive golf that only on the rarest occasions does the man who has done all the work (i.e. the head greenkeeper) get the opportunity to explain, even briefly, what he has set out to do, even if there is no time to say how he did it.

In the end, however, the weather is the final arbiter and one of the charms of links golf is that the weather is rarely the same two days running. I never cease to be amazed that those who try to attract visitors from across the Atlantic attempt to do so by designing and building American-type courses. For one thing, we never do it so well because we have nothing like the budgets and, for another, I feel sure that the special attraction of our famous links is that they are so unlike the vast majority of US courses.

Few would dispute that the Open Championship will never in the foreseeable future be played over any other than the limited elite of links courses, where all the demands of the Open can be met and where the course itself is a renowned challenge.

What is significant is that each of these links could take the Open at very short notice—if all the other 'hardware' could be moved—and there never has been any attempt to tart up the course for the event. For one thing, the headmen of these links

Continued on page 28...

power in difficult conditions.

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are as strong minded as they are skilled in their profession and would not willingly allow any such prostitution of greenkeeping. Also, we are blessed with far-sighted committees, jealous of the reputation of those famous links left in their care.

I have been happy to have been involved for so long in the preparation of links courses. My first advisory visit to St Andrews was in 1947 and to have been one of a many faceted team which has helped to produce such a superb test of golf.

Yet, Walter Woods and I know that

we really do not control the weather and our best laid plans could come to little if unseasonal severe weather arrived without warning. But, so far as this is possible, we have tried to anticipate the worst and to be prepared for it.

We certainly did not have a great deal of help from The Clerk Of The Weather this year, which was even colder and drier than usual for the east coast where, incidentally, I have never known an 'early' spring and where the only thing certain about the weather is its uncertainty!

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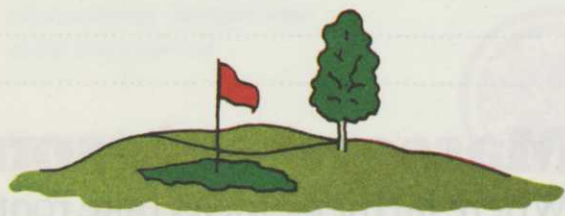
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