

Out·On·The·Course

THERE can be few more responsible jobs in golf course equipment engineering than that of looking after the vast range of machinery at St Andrews. And I know of no one better qualified than the man who has done the job in such a skilled and competent fashion over the past 15 years—George McLaren, 40, the Home of Golf's links mechanic.

I have known George since he first joined the staff and readily testify that he is an engineering genius, capable of completely overhauling tractors, triplex mowers and all the other items of specialist equipment so essential for the upkeep of a golf complex like St Andrews.

George and his wife both belong to St Andrews. The couple have three children and George is a devoted family man, an avid reader and knowledgeable on many subjects.

He loves discussing mowers and his views on the pros and cons of the different kinds of machinery reveal the character of a man who knows what he is talking about. So much so that some manufacturers like to pick his brains occasionally, but he often comes up with practical ideas for modifications.

"I was brought up in a farming community and am a countryman at heart," George said. "After leaving school, I started working for an agricultural and car repair specialist in St Andrews where I received my training in the overhaul of tractors and agricultural machinery. We also had to maintain a lot of the equipment used by the university for sports and recreation areas.

"When I first accepted the position as links mechanic, I really wanted a job with better prospects, more interest and variety and it was not long before I discovered that there was a lot more to keeping a golf course than just cutting the grass!

"I find the complex nature of fine turf management presents a constant challenge. I am not cooped up in the workshop all the time and there is always the opportunity to get outdoors to see how equipment is performing. Four 18 hole courses and a nine-hole layout require a whole range of sophisticated maintenance machinery.

"In my time, we have built up our workshop and are increasing the facilities as time goes on. Whenever we buy another machine, it may mean adding some new item to our range of tools, but apart from re-boring and re-

George McLaren



John Campbell talks to the links engineer at St Andrews.

grinding crankshafts, we don't have to use any engineering companies. We can do most of the overhauls and repairs ourselves.

"The basic workshop machinery that is essential to us is a cylinder grinding machine, oxy-acetylene and arc welding equipment, drills, jacks, hand grinders and a whole range of workshop implements, plus the special tools for doing certain jobs—some we make up ourselves, such as extractors, etc, for dismantling engines.

"When we get a new range of engines to deal with, we have to adapt some of our tools to suit them. Any tools we don't have, we can borrow from local garages where we have a good arrangement. We help them and they help us."

When asked to predict future trends in golf course machinery, George said, "I think we are going to see a greater use of diesel powered engines in a much wider range of mowing equipment. This will reduce running costs and, in some respects, would improve maintenance. Diesel engines give less trouble and they last longer than petrol ones. Running costs, too, could be halved.

"We use 100 gallons of petrol a week on average in summer. With diesel engines, much less fuel would be needed and substantial savings could be made by using agricultural diesel.

"The Japanese have shown it is possible to make powerful, compact

diesel engines with the introduction of mini-tractors, which are now being used widely. I am sure the design and size of these engines will become even smaller and they will be available in all sizes to fit any kind of mowing machine."

I asked what advice on machinery maintenance he would give greenkeepers. "The main thing is to keep machinery well-lubricated and if this is done regularly it will last much longer. There can be no doubt that proper care and maintenance pays dividends—machinery is easier to operate when kept clean and well-oiled and any adjustments that need to be done can be detected more easily.

"I have seen mowers coming in for overhauls at repair agents from local authorities in a deplorably filthy condition. They never get cleaned or washed down and are just put back into the sheds and started up the next day without any checking. Operators who do this never make good workmen. With no pride in their machines, they only abuse them and they are also a liability to their employers.

"The 'average' 18-hole course must keep a good tool kit. I would suggest a spanner and socket set, electric drill and selection of drills and a four or five inch grinder. If they want to do any simple overhauls, such as cleaning points, they will need extractors. A compressor is useful for inflating tyres and a sand blasting machine for cleaning plugs.

"With mowers, it is important to keep the blades sharp and accurately set if they are to do a good cutting job. Cylinder blades should be taken out every winter and ground down to obtain a satisfactory cutting edge and they should be back-lapped at regular intervals through the mowing season.

"Triplex mowers have revolutionised greenkeeping. They can produce a good finish akin to hand mowers on the greens. A great selling point with these machines when they first came on the market was that they did the work of two men and that should allow staff more time to concentrate on other jobs.

George had strong views on the subject of irrigation systems. "It is my job to look after the watering system at St Andrews and this can involve quite a lot of time in the dry summer months. Automatic installations have become extremely sophisticated—the ultimate systems now being offered with individual head control. I



George checks aeration equipment.



Transporting the Ryan heavy-duty turf cutter.

feel that the more simplified the control and upkeep of the systems, the better it is for greenkeepers. There are less chances to make mistakes. I have yet to see a trouble-free irrigation system, so the art and skill of fault finding is important to deal with breakdowns.

"No equipment, however good, can succeed unless there is an availability of spares. There is nothing more frustrating than to have a vital machine sitting in the sheds due to lack of spares

when it is badly needed on the course. We always have a good stock of spare parts here—we could carry more, but there is always the problem of storage. We keep all the necessary things, such as bottom blades, spark plugs, drive belts, hydraulic hoses. Spare chain links are also essential."

Finally, I wondered if the Open Championship and other major events at St Andrews created much more work for George. "I am kept quite busy," he said. "The most critical time

for us is during pre-tournament preparations. Contractors want to plough in new cables and water pipes. We have to accompany them to make sure that permanent lines don't get damaged. Last year's Open went smoothly and we had few problems.

"In closing, I would mention my assistant, who is proving invaluable in the workshop—Walter Woods Junior. He has proved to be an intelligent, skillful engineer, who has made the most of his training."

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