Developing a Golf Course – from virgin territory to opening day: Third and final part

And now the REAL WORK begins

If a golf course has been constructed to schedule and all elements are installed and working effectively, it is imperative that it is maintained correctly during its infancy in order that it may be ready for play when opening day arrives.

Unfortunately, it is so often the case that a schedule will be set back, due to all manner of unforeseen circumstances throughout the construction phase. This in turn has a direct effect on the starting date for a maintenance contract. It can make things very difficult for the greenkeeper and his staff if, for example, a course due to be handed over on August 31st is not his until October 31st.

If the greenkeeper has been employed from the very beginning of the construction phase then he will likely be prepared for such changed circumstances. If not, he must adapt to the situation very quickly.

Once seed has been sown on greens, tees and fairways there is little the contractor or greenkeeper can do until seed germination, apart from ensuring the irrigation system is working efficiently and keeping rabbits, moles or deer off the site.

The contractor, as part of the construction contract, will be responsible for limited maintenance of the new course: for example, an agreed number of mowings before handing over. He will also be obliged to make good any defects that may occur within a negotiated period, such as wet areas due to problems with drainage, scour effect due to extreme surface run-off or poor acceptance of grass seed.

Eventually the course will become the responsibility of the greenkeeper and it will left to his knowledge and experience to make the necessary decisions in treating any problems he encounters.

When the grass is young it is extremely susceptible to disease: for example damping-off, red thread, fusarium etc. and the greenkeeper must be able to swiftly recognise disease symptoms in order to prevent the problem becoming difficult to eradicate.

Problems may occur for a number of reasons: nutrient deficiencies; animals and pests; environmental stresses; heavy machinery compaction or excess watering. It is the responsibility of every greenkeeper to retain the balance at all times. Whilst the course is within its establishment period he may at least breath a sigh of relief that there aren’t hordes of heavy-footed players (with golf trolleys – the scourge of every course) making his job still more difficult. The golf course though, must be maintained to steadily reach a point at which it can withstand the ultimate treatment. After all, this is why a golf course exists – to be played on. So often, greenkeepers utter the words ‘the golf course would be great if we didn’t have all these bloody golfers walking across it.’ I suppose that is one of the reasons why Augustus National always looks so perfect for The Masters – it’s closed six months of the year!

As the course begins to establish, the greenkeeper must keep a close eye on minor changes in the quality of the turf, for sometimes a disease can take hold almost overnight. Sometimes an indication of stress can only be seen when the grass itself has reached a point where serious action is required to resolve it. In some respects, it is almost a balancing act, where turf is given feed only when it cries out for it, but to leave it a further day may have fatal consequences. If the greenkeeper succeeds in juggling his many roles as course manager; golf course constructor; golf course architect; agronomist; drainage specialist; irrigation engineer and personnel manager and still manages to manoeuvre the course in readiness for the all-important opening, then he has overcome the hardest task in the business. To take a golf course from the constructor and to literally ‘tame it’ is a mammoth task. Thankfully, many greenkeepers are well up to this extraordinary feat, with approved colleges now training greenkeepers to be multi-talented specialists. This inevitably makes for better and forever improving standards of golf courses in this country and throughout Europe.