

Cecil George goes back to the beginnings of the Open Support team and recalls some of the memorable moments on its way to Royal Troon 1997.

Another Open Championship, another Support Team!

Let's go back to when it all began St Andrews Open Championship, 1984, before the amalgamation of the Associations.

The Scottish and International Golf Greenkeepers, through Walter Woods, got the chance to be involved in The Open. Bunker raking at the Open Championship had been inconsistent – it had been left to the Championship clubs to keep the bunkers in order. The R&A wanted a quality job yet at some courses “yoppers” and other odd-bods were hired to the detriment of the bunkers. Walter noticed this and saw the opportunity to rectify the matter. Before the 1984 Open he suggested that qualified greenkeepers should look after the bunkers. He could, of course, have involved his own staff but felt that his men were out early in the morning and evening doing their general work along with all the added extras The Open brings to the already overworked staff.

Walter proposed that SIGGA could be the people to carry out the duties of bunker raking throughout the tournament, free of charge. He did, however, ask that the R & A provide a tent where the greenkeepers could meet, have a place to report to, organise the bunker rakers and rest. Walter also mentioned that if anything untoward happened, such as inclement weather, vandalism or assistance required, there would be a glut of experienced greenkeepers on hand for any eventuality.

His words have come true on many occasions, none more so than when the heavens opened up in 1988 and Lytham St Annes became the second flood. Saturday's third round was postponed until Sunday and Jimmy MacDonald used the greenkeepers to sweep the water off the green for the rest of the day and most of that night.

At Royal Birkdale in 1991 my old friend, Tom O'Brien, had a green badly damaged by vandals. The greenkeepers again came to the rescue in assisting to rectify the damage and so allowing play to start as per the R & A programme.

Many interesting, or should I say “weird” happenings, have taken place year after year. When



Ian MacLeod after raking the bunker Nick Faldo managed to find on the first morning of the 1996 event

OPEN. memories

we started the luxury of sleeping in a bed was limited to the lucky few who could cram into two six berth caravans. I wasn't one of the lucky ones who was allocated a bed, I and a few others slept on the floor. I still remember marks on my side from the time I woke with a pain in my side and on examination I had a black and blue patch which I could not explain. The next night I again felt something pressing on my sore bit. Being a little less inebriated than the night before I realised there was the connection for a gas pipe sticking into my side!

At Turnberry in 1986 we bor-

rowed a perfectly good big tent from Jimmy Kidd, of Gleneagles, which held about 30. I won't go into the erection of the tent, Head Greenkeepers know everything! What some don't know they invent and the first attempt at putting up the tent was a fiasco.

The site was nearly in George Brown's back garden and let's say it was soft stony ground! The pegs were only half in the ground and I have to say there was an excellent bar run by the Turnberry Hotel staff, for the staff and after an evening of tripping over the guy ropes and generally giving the tent abuse, it partly col-

lapsed in the night.

The next morning at 5.30am I was standing outside the tent shouting out names of greenkeepers to be on the 1st tee for 7am. I could not ask Scott MacCallum to print the utterances that came from the tent!

It was at Turnberry in '86, on a suggestion from Chris Kennedy, of Wentworth, that we started sending a bunker raker with each match. This was a great success and the format has not been changed since.

From Turnberry to Muirfield 1987 and we still worked out of the two caravans and the big tent

OPEN memories

was still our main dormitory. We had been asking through the old greenkeeper magazine for volunteers to rake bunkers at The Open and had had some response from both our sister Associations and we always had the few stalwarts from England who took a holiday and assisted in the bunker raking. In 1987 for the first time we saw quite an increase from south of the border and one in particular was Richard Heaslip. He came on his motorbike with his own tent. The weather was gales and lashing rain in July even to us was unexpected. Again the big tent came down and I remember Richard standing looking at his gear lying all over the place and soaking wet. Still, The Open went on and the greenkeepers did their share of clearing up.

This was one of the years when our tent in the village was back to back with the stewards tent. We formed a lasting friendship with the Stewards the first year at St Andrews and some of us still meet in the Stewards tent at the close of each day's play.

At Muirfield in '87 there was still no distribution of shirts, waterproofs or umbrellas though we did get the meal tickets which was excellent. However, the amount of food some of the lads put away we would have to give them an abundance of tickets to stove off their hunger.

The Swedish greenkeepers at this time were some of our stalwarts in particular Carl, Einar and Jan. I think Einar had a bed somewhere while Carl and Jan slept in their car. One morning at Muirfield the East mist crept in from the sea and the greenkeepers started arriving in small groups. I looked out of the caravan window and the two huge Swedes seemed to appear like the Vikings of old coming from their long boats for a bit of rape and pillage instead of a bit of rake and bevy!

The Swedes always gave me food for thought. Why do the biggest men always take the small plastic rakes?

It is pleasing to hear that the Swedish Greenkeepers Association is now involved with a support team at the Swedish Open. I am sure anyone who wants to assist need only contact Stig Pers-



Above: At least you get a good view...
Left: Blending in with the crowds

you might, like Jimmy Paton, be rewarded with a set of irons. Mark Calcavecchia thanked Jimmy then gave him the set of irons from his bag. I was always envious of this show of generosity, the most I ever got from a pro was a handful of banana skins from Paul Azinger at Muirfield '87 when he was leading going into the final round.

We have greenkeepers from all over the world visit our marquee. Some of them have raked bunkers last year at St Annes with two young men from Augusta out doing their bit. The Swedes are always present, Welshman John Rodgers, reported in from Thailand and there were lads from Germany, France, Spain, Canada, USA, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa and these were only the greenkeepers I remember speaking to.

Harry Diamond always has a story to hand and last time we were at Royal Troon he and I were asked to go down to Norman Ferguson's house to invite him up to the tent for the reception BIGGA was giving for the Press. We got down to Norman's to find him out in his garden lifting his early tatties. "No panic here" Harry said, "That's Norman - cool, calm and deliberate in the middle of the Open Championship."

Don't be like a young greenkeeper at Muirfield in 1987. He came into the Portakabin, threw his rake with disgust in the corner and said, "Tomorrow give me the clubs and give that sand-martin I was out with the rake and I'll return a better score than he put in today!"

See you all doon at Troon soon!

son and his or her wish will be granted.

Reverting back to St Andrews '84 and Jimmy Neilson, of Murrayfield, was the President of the SIGGA. He tells me all they had in the tent was a bar, of course, and six promotional advert stands. After the first practice day our tent was transformed, lovely tables and chairs and even a carpet. The recliners and furnishings were borrowed or something (!) from a certain hotel in St Andrews. Walter said the Manager was a sympathetic friend.

As all of you who have raked bunkers at the Open will know rotas are been drawn up, and there is a list of instructions. You have to keep to the ropes, only speak when spoken to, assist the lady scorers and make yourself "inconspicuous". The last time at Royal Troon, Alex Robertson, of Grangemouth, made himself so inconspicuous that he was reported missing by one of the chappies on the intercom. Chris Kennedy went out to see where Alex had gone to find Alex sitting inside the rope with his faithful rake beside him. Chris asked where he had been, "Here" was the reply, "Just making myself

inconspicuous!" Since then we have walked with the scorer and the person carrying the scoreboard.

This turned out to be a godsend especially in wet and windy weather where we, being the improvisers and forward thinkers of the golfing fraternity have assisted boys and girls to hold the score boards up in strong winds, shelter the scorers with umbrellas from the rain while at the same time keeping a professional eye on the golfers and how many strokes each takes, in particular, when a pro is out of sight of the scorer.

Our professionalism came to the fore at Lytham last year when Duncan Smith, of our support team, was called in by the R&A to assist in a rather awkward situation. The pro, Des Smyth, had been in a bunker but had miscalculated his score for that hole. Duncan said "Yes, he had raked that bunker and yes, the pro's score was wrong". So with the greenkeeper's assistance all was put to right. This should be a lesson to all of us who are involved in the Support Team, always remember "Big Brother is Watching You!" If you are lucky enough

Dream team head into first

Billy McLachlan and his team are well prepared for this month's Open Championship as Scott MacCallum discovered when he paid a visit a month before the big week.

Preparing an Open Championship venue would be a dream for many greenkeepers but with only one Open a year, and a set rota of venues, it is an ambition which remains unfulfilled for most.

Not so Billy McLachlan who, at the age of 33, is the man charged with ensuring Royal Troon is at its perfect best for the visit of the world's top golfers in the third week in July.

A local man, Billy joined the staff at Troon in 1982 working under Norman Ferguson and took over from Norman at the beginning of '94 with The Open Championship looming over the horizon.

If he is daunted by the prospect of having his work on show to thousands of spectators and billions of television viewers across the world, Billy does a good job of hiding it. Blessed with the matter-of-fact demeanour which prevents many Scots from getting above themselves, Billy is taking everything in his stride.

One of his master strokes, however, had nothing to do with the golf course but, along the lines of Kenny Dalglish, Alex Ferguson and Roy Aitken (hopefully!), has been in a great new signing.

Now I don't believe Jim Devlin cost Billy a huge transfer fee – and not because he arrived under the Bosman Ruling – but Jim has quickly proved that he's worth more than his weight in gold.

Previously the Course Supervisor at three of Troon's Municipal courses, Jim joined Royal Troon as Billy's Deputy in December of last year.

He brought with him a wealth of experience and ability which was identified when he was a finalist in the Miracle Professional Premier Greenkeeper of the Year competition in '96.

"It is fortunate that we have got together this year and have started to change a few things. It actually looks as though we have changed them for The Open but they would have been done any-



Billy McLachlan, fourth from left, Jim Devlin, second from left and the Troon team

way," explained Billy, speaking from the maintenance unit which itself shows signs of a recent significant overall and Jim's influence.

Jim reinforces the point by adding, "We are trying to get the course to a standard where it is going to be like it all the time and it just happens that it looks as though it is being done specifically for The Open."

The talents of Billy, Jim and the rest of the team combined with a new watering system should ensure a true test for the world's best golfers and provide sufficient rough to make The Open field think twice. In 1989 when Mark Calcavecchia defeated Greg Norman and Wayne Grady in the first ever four hole play-off, you may recall a lack of water kept rough down to a minimum ensuring that



Jim on the "postage stamp"

the course was less fierce than it was originally intended to be

"There were certain things we were doing which we were quite happy with and wanted to keep going and other things which Jim brought in and we thought were good ideas.

"Many of these were just small. Things going on a different times and different materials that Jim had used but I hadn't," explained Billy, for whom the '97 Open Championship will be the third on which he has worked.

The approach is obviously to the liking of the R&A which has been happy to allow Billy and his team to get on with their work.

"They visited last August and on the strength of that we have tightened four fairways and David Boocock, the R&A agronomist, visited in March and he was happy with the way things were looking.

"If they were here all the time we would be wondering if they were worried about us but they are quite happy to let us get on with it," said Billy.

"They could see that we were on the right tracks," added Jim.

Among the major tasks that the team has carried out has been the revetting of 62 of the courses 84 bunkers and the relaying of the path on the course's most famous hole – The Postage Stamp.

"We lifted all the sleepers and relaid them so that they were horizontal to the hill and not running down the hill. We're pleased with the way it looks," said Jim.

Billy visited Royal Lytham last

year during The Open to get a flavour of how the Championship went and spent time in the company of Jimmy MacDonald MBE, whose major championship experience is second to none.

"Jimmy was a great help and despite being busy took time to talk to me. I've also spoken to George Brown at Turnberry and, of course, Norman Ferguson and been given some excellent advice."

A month before the Sunday when the players start to arrive and begin practising the course looked immaculate and more than capable of hosting The Open then and there.

"The idea of the Championship is that you have the course in such a condition that all you need is a final tweak to get it to where you want it. The last thing you need to be doing is sitting three weeks before it and wondering what we need to do it get it



ready. You want it to be there early so that you can keep it bubbling over ready for that final tweak," explained Billy.

The two men obviously have a very good rapport and think along the same lines on what they want to achieve.

"We've had our greens down for a little while now so it's not a case of drastic cutting on the day. It's just that final adjustment and we are quite close now," said Jim.

"We're trying to do a week's work every day at the moment. We want to get it right and we

Open with confidence

Scenic pictures by BRIAN MORGAN



have the bodies to do it," said Billy.

"If you start worrying about it that's when things start to go wrong and you start thinking about things you haven't done rather than concentrating on things you have," said Jim.

The course was closed on June 29 and prior to that, on June 15, member's guests were also stopped.

The greenkeeping team has had to work closely with the outside contractors brought in to erect all the tents and stands which go together to create the

modern day Open venue.

"We marked out tracks for them all with a yellow line so we could keep the mess where we wanted it and to begin with everyone stuck to these but as we are getting nearer the time more people are around and just nip in here and there. A few weeks ago it didn't bother us but nearer the time there isn't enough time to repair damage," said Jim.

"When I went to Lytham last year I learned that that they stopped visitors but not member's guest and the course was as busy

as ever so we made the decision to stop member's guests," said Billy.

The 12 man Troon Greenkeeping team works very much as a unit and everyone has a say.

"We've tried to ensure that it is not a one man or a two man show here. Everyone is involved and if any of the guys comes up with an idea we'll sit and listen. None of us is so big headed or selfish to say it's our way or nothing. I'm sure Billy would have the whole team with him at the prize giving on the Sunday afternoon if he could," said Jim.

"Don't remind me," says Billy, as he contemplates the most public part of the job of an Open course's Head Greenkeeper. "I'll probably trip up walking onto the green."

It is perhaps the one thing which crystallises the scale of the event for Billy who has grown up watching, and, as "one of the boys", working at Open Championships.

"Jim and I have talked about it and it is one of those things that if you did start to think about it from early in the year you could get quite worried. But you tell yourself that you will do your best and the Championship will be here and gone. All you can do is try your best.

"If you thought too deeply into it and worried about all the

things you needed to do and the number of people out there watching you'd end up jumping off Ailsa Craig out there. You have just got to get on with it," said Billy.

"Good weather, nothing unforeseen, no problems. That'll do us. It's not a lot to ask for. Is it?"

No it isn't. But you can't help thinking if it doesn't quite happen like that Billy, Jim and the team will be able to handle themselves whatever is thrown at them.

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY

- Three Toro Greensmasters
- One Toro Fairway Mower 5300
- One Ransomes 180
- One Toro 216
- Four Ford Tractors
- 11 Hand Machines
- Cartes/Paladins
- Three Cushmams with various slitters, top dressers and sprayers
- One Iseki Mini Tractor, Coremaster Tiner
- One Vertidrain
- One Uni Drill Seeder
- One Power Riddle
- One Power Shredder
- Five Pedestrian Rotaries
- Four Flymos
- One set of Hydraulic Gangs
- Two Turf Cutters.