An Open return

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The Open Championship is something very special indeed and to be a part of this is a great privilege. It is a challenge that I thoroughly enjoy. Our aim is to maintain the condition of the course for the days on the golfing calendar, which are not all that different no matter what course you are custodian of. It is not until the final putt is made and the champion golfer is crowned that we can put our feet up momentarily before resuming normal business. Then we can reassess ourselves and spend some quality time with our family and friends. It is not always easy to maintain a work life balance being a greenkeeper and custodians of our precious green spaces. I was once given some sound advice by a wise old greenkeeper as he approached retirement after devoting many years of loyal service: “Make sure you have a life outside work ladde”. And that is what we must all strive to do. Fewer jobs can be quite as demanding but in the same light as rewarding.

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Maintaining a consistently good quality course is achievable, but delivering perfection is not. With just a little help from Mother Nature and a small amount of man’s intervention we can achieve something worthy.

Royal Lytham and St. Annes presents a management and maintenance challenge. The 205 bunkers that we have on the Championship course provide not only a major challenge for the golfer, but also for our team.

Eighty bunkers have been rebuilt during our last phase of the bunker programme, in tandem with general turf reinstatement work. A great effort was made to ensure that this work was completed by Christmas. However, this winter has been a blessing compared to the winters of 2009 and 2010. The conditions have been conducive to completing our winter programme, in tandem with our last phase of the bunker programme, in tandem with our winter programme schedule, whilst ensuring that we maintain good winter playing conditions.

May to June: Early May presents the challenge of turfing work adjacent to the Championship. The angle of the greenside bunkers is set at 65 – 70°, fairway bunkers are set at an angle of 55 – 60°. We aim to maintain the angle of the sand at approximately 15 – 25°. The sand is sourced locally from the beach at St Annes and is screened on site to remove the shell and pebble content. Sand selection and suitability is always a hot topic at nearly every club, but in its 126-year history Lytham has kept to the indigenous fine beach sand.

Our aim is to maintain a relatively firm bunker playing conditions that remain consistent, especially near to the face to reduce the likelihood of balls resting close to the bunker faces.

March to April: Activities will focus on ensuring that all our turfing works establish successfully, eliminating the development of seams, and guarding against drought damage. A dedicated team assigned to hand watering achieves this. This is paramount and ensures that our water usage is specifically directed to those areas of play that need it. Even with modern day automatic irrigation systems, this is not always achievable. We try to keep returfing to a minimum during the winter before an Open. However with 205 bunkers, which require the faces to be replaced on a regular basis, inevitably an element of turfing work adjacent to the bunker perimeters is required. The playing surfaces are continually being refined. In tandem with regular sand topdressing, light fertiliser applications and grooming.

The Build Up

January to February: The course gets a very early and thorough spring clean. Specific activities will include aeration, topdressing and grooming. This is the period when our manpower resources also focus on the careful process of bunker preparation. During a careful bunker-by-bunker review, we will specifically ensure that the depth and angle of sand is appropriate to ensure playability for the Championship. The angle of the greenside bunkers is set at 65 – 70°, fairway bunkers are set at an angle of 55 – 60°. We aim to maintain the angle of the sand at approximately 15 – 25°. The sand is sourced locally from the beach at St Annes and is screened on site to remove the shell and pebble content. Sand selection and suitability is always a hot topic at nearly every club, but in its 126-year history Lytham has kept to the indigenous fine beach sand.

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By the time we eventually reach June and July, most of the specific maintenance schedule will have been implemented and our efforts are then geared towards intensifying our cutting activities, to ensure that the playing surfaces are refined to tournament standards. It all sounds a simple and straightforward exercise, but it can be anything but if the weather turns against you. We have to be well versed in strategies in coping with...
An Open return

The Open Championship returns to Royal Lytham and St. Annes Golf Club this year and Head Greenkeeper, Paul Smith, provided GI with an insight into the preparations for the Championship and some fascinating background on the historic links course.

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The course at Royal Lytham and St. Annes is a fine example of nature and golf working in harmony together. Listed as a Biological Heritage Site by Lancashire County Council, its dune grassland and rare ecosystem preserve the ancient past of the site, now surrounded by red-brick Victorian houses, a school, hospital and a railway.

Facetile

- Current species composition: greens: Browntop bent 43%, Fescue 27%, Poa annua 23%, Yorkshire fog 2%, Perennial ryegrass 1%, Others 4%.
- Current species composition: tees: Browntop bent 45%, Fescue 24%, Poa annua 17%, Smooth-stemmed meadow grass 9%, Yorkshire fog 1%, Perennial ryegrass 3%, Others 1%.

Soil moisture: measured as a percentage figure.

Target <8mm - Vertical deviation in mm per 100mm.

- Average night time temperature 6.1˚C
- Average annual sunshine 1526 hours
- Average annual rainfall 627mm

The underlying key to the changes was to make the best players think and take greater measures this year to reduce the severity of the rough in places. Some of these changes have been made. If you have a valued membership, we are now starting to see the improvements work on the course is continually ongoing. Since 2001 we have embarked on a progressive ecological management programme developed to enhance the course’s Biological Heritage Site status, which supports a mosaic of species, rich dune grassland, heath and scrub. This work has not only improved the ecology of the site but has restored the original open character of the links.

The Open Preview

Performance criteria are met which continues to enhance the course’s Biological Heritage Site status, which supports a mosaic of species; rich dune grassland, heath and scrub. The objective of the STRI’s visits intensifies as the Open approaches. The objective of the STRI’s visits is to ensure that specific performance criteria are met which fall within site specific tournament target ranges, which include:

- Soil moisture: measured as a percentage figure.
- Hardness: measured as a percentage figure.
- Vertical deviation in mm per 100mm.

The intention was not to take the course further to maintain its modern day challenge.

In terms of design, only very minor changes have been made. If you have a valued membership, the changes are all conditions that can affect play. High winds, strong sunshine and heavy downpours are all conditions that can affect play.

The objective of these visits is to select what specific performance criteria are met which fall within site specific tournament target ranges. The course is set up so differently for the Open than normal; the challenge remains the same as for the membership. Although it is fair to say that we would normally be taking greater measures this year to reduce the severity of the rough in places, brought about by the wet spring and summer. The fairway widths vary from 20 to 40 yards, so the course presents a challenge but remains fair and generous in places. We will be maintaining a height of cut of 9-11mm depending on conditions. The first cut of fairway rough is 3m wide at 50mm with the second cut also 3m at 100mm.

The Course Changes

Throughout our preparations there has been a treatment of thatch sanding. Consequently the fairway surfaces are firmer, more refined and smoother. Our target is to add a little more risk to the adoption of an aggressive strategy. There was no target set for the overall length of the layout and each hole was considered on an individual basis and to ensure an even balance of lengths of holes throughout the course.

Some of the changes have been minor but others significant. The work has been varied and has entailed the construction of new bunkers, trees and the creation of mazes along with the development of new dune systems and the repitition of the 7th green in 2009. All the changes are now in play and have strengthened a formidable course. Based on the changes that have been made it should give a stern test than in 2001. What is really pleasing is how well the changes have blended into the existing links landscape, which has had a mix of elevation changes of both natural and artificial sand dunes.

All in all these varied and subtle changes will only go to strengthen the course further to maintain its modern day challenge.

Ongoing Maintenance post-2001

Royal Lytham and St. Annes is an example of nature and golf working in harmony together. Listed as a Biological Heritage Site by Lancashire County Council, its dune grassland and rare ecosystem preserve the ancient past of the site, now surrounded by red-brick Victorian houses, a school, hospital and a railway. The course has been granted permission by the Forestry Commission to clear internal pockets of white Poplar trees and degenerate perimeter specimens. Some of these areas
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Facetile

Current species composition greens:
- Browntop bent: 43%
- Fescue: 27%
- Poa annua: 23%
- Yorkshire fog: 8%
- Perennial ryegrass: 1%
- Others: 4%

Current species composition tees:
- Browntop bent: 45%
- Fescue: 24%
- Poa annua: 17%
- Smooth staked meadow grass: 9%
- Yorkshire fog: 1%
- Perennial ryegrass: 3%
- Others: 1%

Factfile

Current species composition fairways:
- Browntop bent: 43%
- Fescue: 44%
- Poa annua: 18%
- Yorkshire fog: 2%
- Perennial ryegrass: 6%
- Others: 2%

• Soil moisture: measured as a percentage figure

Hardness (interaction between the ball and turf) is optimised without the potential to compromise turf health trueness

and smoothness. Our target is 15 – 25%.

• Firmness: measured in gravities. Target 100 – 120 gravities
• Smoothness: measured by vertical deviation in mm per metre. Target <18mm
• Trueness: measured by lateral deviation in mm per metre. Target <4mm
• Green speed: Target 10 – 10½ feet

So attention to detail is more than ever closely scrutinised. Unfortunately decades ago there tended to be the misguided use of inappropriate grass species, in particularly Rye grass. At the time this was seen as a solution to wear tolerance issues, but these grasses tended to have higher input requirements and dominated lawns at the expense of the finer grasses. The results from our commitment to a long term overseeding programme have been gradual but we are now starting to see the rewards.

Our greatest success has been the improvement and development of the fairways, which have undergone a treatment of thatch reduction, turf conditioning and sanding. Consequently the fairway surfaces are firmer, more refined and frrier draining. We have fewer issues with worm castings and are less productive in terms of clipping yields. Improvement work on the course is continually ongoing.

Since 2001 we have embarked on a progressive ecological management programme developed to enhance the course’s Biological Heritage Site, which supports a mosaic of species-rich dune grassland, heath and scrub. This work has not only improved the ecology of the site but has restored the original open character of the links.

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have been replanted with gorse and broom, which has had a positive ecological impact. One such impact has seen the increase in nesting and feeding habitat for small birds.

1. Linnet (Carduelis cannabina) is a red data species noted nesting within the gorse. They benefit from a variety of habitats; from dune grassland to feed and scrub to nest.

2. Stonechat (Saxicola torquata) is an amber data species, which is another uncommon bird nesting within the gorse plantation at the 18th hole.

The general theme of restoring an open links landscape and associated habitat has also seen an increase in and special importance to ground nesting birds including both the skylark (Alauda arvensis) and meadow pipit (Anthus pratensis).

The Open Greenkeeping Team

We have 11 permanent full timers, one part timer working two days a week and a member of staff on a short-term contract to ease the workload this year. However, an additional 24 Open tournament support staff supplement this for the week before and the week of the Open. We also have a small team of dedicated fitters and mechanics supplied by John Deere who are providing the tournament machinery support along with Hunter Grinders. So our numbers swell to 40+ during the week of the Open.

And of course we have the invaluable BIGGA Support Team so the level of expertise at hand to help is quite astounding.

For some members of the permanent team it will be their last Open; three of whom Richard Atkin, Phil Medcalf and David Troup have provided the club with a lifetime of loyal and worthy service. Other recent recruits will be experiencing and relishing their first Open Championship. It will be special for everyone involved. One thing for certain is we will all take away some lifelong memories as we witness the most gifted golfers in the world pit their wits against the course, the weather and each other. That should quench anyone’s thirst.

Next Month’s GI
- The Open Review
All the news and stories from The BIGGA Open Support Team at Royal Lytham and St. Annes

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