Double take at Muirfield

How is Colin Irvine preparing for staging the greatest golfing show on earth – 11 years after his last experience of The Open? How have expectations changed, and what are the technical challenges? Steve Castle found out.
The last time Colin Irvine took charge of preparing a course for The Open Championship in 2002, Ernie Els scooped the Claret Jug. So there’s a pleasing symmetry to The Big Easy returning to Muirfield to defend the title this summer.

The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers – to give Muirfield its official title – is one of just 15 courses in the world to receive maximum marks in Rolex’s recent top 1,000 Golf Courses book. I arrived on a perfect sunny winter’s morning, with golfers – some clad in traditional plus fours – strolling round the course which has tested legends of the sport since hosting its first Open in 1892. The tournament’s first tee shot was still months away, and it was hard to see exactly where tens of thousands of spectators plus media – and the BIGGA Open Support Team – will be housed.

I asked Colin what he’s most looking forward to and he replied, tongue firmly in cheek, “Sunday night”. He added: “We reopen on the Monday morning for the R&A’s official guests’ day with the holes in the same position as The Open. We then cut the greens, rake the bunkers, then send the guys home because everybody’s very tired.”

After studying at Elmwood College Colin was offered a summer job at Muirfield in 1981, and after catching the greenkeeping bug was promoted to second in charge before leaving for Germany after the 1992 Open.

“I fancied travelling and doing something different, and I like a challenge, so I spent two years at Dusseldorf Golf Club. It was an inland course with a completely different setup so I knew it would broaden my education. ”

He admitted he spoke no German on arrival – but soon picked up the language after studying at night school. After a valuable two years he returned and became Course Manager in 1994. So how has his role changed since Els’s last triumph in 2002?

“If they have a question they can put it straight to me so it works well.”

Colin is relaxed despite me bombarding him with questions, eager to discover the technical secrets of preparing a course for an event of this magnitude. There’s already a map on his office wall showing the planned locations of the spectator stands and also the tented village.

He said: “We topdress the greens with pure sand every three weeks, then they’ll get an application of lawn sand in April and an organic fertiliser in late May – although this is dependent on weather. We use a lot of wetting agents to let the irrigation water through as evenly as possible so the rootzone is evenly moist.

“The greens are fescue dominant. More bent comes in if you get wet summers, you can’t help that. Last spring the fescue was beautiful on them because it was 23C in March.

“Then the weather deteriorated from there. Of course, the weather’s totally out of your hands – you just have to adapt to it and work round it. Sunlight was a big factor last year – we barely had any! But if you think we’ve got it tough, you should speak to the guys on other courses...”

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A map with plans for the stands and the tented village

The contrast in rainfall figures between the East and West of Scotland is truly remarkable. Last month’s GI featured The Carrick on Loch Lomond that had a staggering 1800mm of rainfall last year, following on from 2200mm in 2011. This dwarfs Muirfield’s rainfall in 2012 which was 782mm – although that was their highest for ten years. Unfortunately the team did have to battle poor conditions prior to their last Open.

“It was very wet in 2002. There were no flooded bunkers or anything, but of course you prefer a links course to have a drier, browner presentation.

“We sand the fairways and the surrounds a lot more now trying to compensate if it’s wet – although we do that every year, not just because it’s The Open.

“July is an unpredictable month here. Over the last ten years we get 71mm in July on average. The wettest was 112mm in 2007 and the driest was 18mm in 2004. There’s generally a westerly wind but on the Saturday of the last Open we had a north-easterly storm and there were a lot of high scores.

“The drainage is good but if you’re using a lot of heavy machinery things get compacted.”

“Obviously this requires more staff so we’re very grateful to the local courses at Gullane, Archerfield, Luffness and the Renaissance Club who have all agreed to allow one of their greenkeepers to work here during The Open. We also have a greenkeeper from each of the other Open venues, a few on scholarships from the R&AA and of course the BIGGA Support Team.

“This support network offers divoting assistance as well as bunker raking and help with any other tasks. As Colin said: “If we’re not diverting or raking bunkers in the morning it frees us up for other tasks. We double cut greens with 18 holes.
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This support network offers divoting assistance as well as bunker raking and help with any other tasks. As Colin said: “If we’re not diverting or raking bunkers in the morning it frees us up for other tasks. We double cut greens with 18
inches hand mowers with greensmowers to refine things. This is time consuming work so we need support.

The R&A will decide on the green speed, they normally say about 10.5. Through the summer they run between 9.5 and 11 anyway.

“We close the course a fairnight before it all starts, and as any greenskeeper will tell you, it’s a lot easier to work without golfers! We don’t actually make any changes to our procedures, it’s more that everything intensifies.

“The Sunday before The Open is a test day where we do everything that we would do before the Thursday of the tournament, and then another dummy run on the Tuesday before.

“A couple of years ago MJ Abbott installed a new RainBird irrigation system to make things more controllable in the run up to a tournament. Ryus have to slow the greens down or add a bit of moisture you’ve got that facility rather than going out with a hose.

It turns out that the major change in 11 years is in the design of the course, which officially opened in 1991. Over the winters of 2010 and 2011, renowned golf course architect Dr Martin Hawtree carried out a review of Muirfield, mainly to ensure it remained a true championship test, extending the course to 7245 yards.

Colin says: “This hasn’t changed the characteristics of the course. The most noticeable difference is at the 9th which is now a longer par five into the prevailing wind.”

The team have also completed intense work on the rough. Colin adds: “Muirfield is famed for its fast growing rough. It’s hard to judge because of the uncertainty over the weather. You obviously want it long enough to cater for a mishit shot but not so long the ball is lost.”

“I accept the unreasonable opportunity to walk parts of the course with Colin and stand on the 18th tee gazing towards the distant green and the famous clubhouse. The prospect of having to get par from here to secure the Claret Jug would surely fill even the most experienced golfer with dread. Over to you Tiger, Rory, Justin and Ernie.

The extension of certain greens to provide more championship pin positions
- The introduction of six new championship tees, extending the course to 7245 yards
- The Sunday before The Open
- The relocation of greenside bunkers to tighten the entrances to selected drive areas
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OPEN PREVIEW

The European Tour’s new all-weather office in the stunning new clubhouse.

**AERATION PROGRAMME**
- 8mm or 12mm solid tining of the greens, aprons and tees
- Fairways vertidrained – 19mm carries and fairways, 12mm fairway approaches
- Greens tined once or twice a year, either in November or February depending on the weather
- Fairways tined once a year or once every two years

**HEIGHT OF CUT (SUMMER)**
- 4mm minimum on greens, generally 4.5mm
- Aprons and tees 8mm
- Fairways and surrounds 11mm

**MACHINERY LIST**

**TRACTORS**
- John Deere 4520
- John Deere 4600 with loader
- John Deere 4410 with loader
- John Deere 4520

**FAIWAYS**
- John Deere 7500E x 2
- John Deere 8000E

**GREENS**
- John Deere 2500E x 2
- John Deere 180 SL x 8

**TEES**
- John Deere 220C x 4

**APRONS**
- John Deere 180C x 5

**GEN MACHINERY**
- John Deere Pro Gator
- John Deere E Gators x 3
- John Deere 1565 with Laatex deck
- John Deere 2653 B
- John Deere 365 Gang Mower
- John Deere Aercore
- Wiedenmann Terra Spike
- Wiedenmann Super 600 Flail Mower
- Daiga 410 & 415
- Toppdressers
- Vredo & Charterhouse Overseeders
- TruTurf Rollers x 2

**WORKSHOP**
- Hunter Grinders/ Jupiter & Orion
- Rotary Two Post Lift

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Getting to know...what your members want

In a bid to answer this fundamental question, Mike Bush MG – Course Manager at St Mellion International Golf Club - quizzed hundreds of the club’s members, and the results are helping to shape his future strategy.

St Mellion’s Player Survey has highlighted that course condition is a key priority for members – and it’s also provided some key pointers regarding turf management practices and priorities in the future for Mike.

Presenting the results at BIGGA’s Devon & Cornwall Spring Seminar, held at the Club, Mike identified that the condition of greens was consistently the most important factor for members across the Club’s two 18-hole courses – the Kernow – designed primarily as a resort golf course – and the original championship Nicklaus Signature Course.

The condition of fairways and tees were also of very high importance, although tees were of slightly less importance to lower handicap players on the Nicklaus Course.

Design and aesthetics of the playing environment were also ranked as highly important. “Pleasingly for the greenkeeping team, the satisfaction with the condition of most aspects of the playing surfaces was high, especially the greens and fairways,” reported Mike. “However, the slightly lower satisfaction of the tee conditions has indicated we will need to focus more on those areas to bring them up to the same high level as the rest of the course.”

He added that the price of membership was listed as the second most important factor on both courses. “It is a factor that had to be acknowledged in the current economic climate. We have to manage our costs more effectively to ensure our membership price remains competitive, and to recognise that we don’t have a blank cheque to spend on areas that won’t give members a valued return.”

The Survey was developed and tailored to the Club’s specific needs by Syngenta, based on a previous survey which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

Managing to players’ demands

The survey did throw up some fascinating differences between the Club’s two courses and the golfers that play them. Mike says the results could now help the team tailor management of the two courses more effectively to cater for the different players’ average abilities and meet required criteria of levels of importance.

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The St Mellion Player Survey was developed and tailored to the Club’s specific needs by Syngenta, based on the company’s original Golf Player Survey, which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

The findings from the 260 St Mellion members who took part in the on-line questionnaire over the early part of 2013 were remarkably consistent, but added a level of detail to enable Mike Bush to consider future actions. Read the full report on the GreenCast website.

Mike and his team had already been trialling the use of Rescue to remove coarse grasses in the rough and leave desirable finer fescue species, in an effort to reduce time players spend looking for balls and to speed up play – which was a key area of dissatisfaction for some players.

Mike and the team was the fact that delivers the ball sitting proudly on the turf surface, with tight mown fairways were rated as far more crucial. “That has implications for height and frequency of cut and other practices that we are doing for their benefit, which might possibly release time and budget to spend in other areas.”

However, they both rated smooth ball roll and even pace as crucial to speed up play – which was a key factor that attracted them to a course, followed by the aesthetics of the course and the quality of greens. Turf quality on the rest of the course, along with a friendly atmosphere in the club, ranked lower.

Mike believed these results demonstrated that investment in new features on the course and improving the quality of playing surfaces was always going to prove a key factor in attracting new players, as well as maintaining the interest and satisfaction of existing members.

Mike acknowledged that the survey highlighted the issue of an ageing of golf population, especially in the South West region where St Mellion is located, with a higher proportion of retired players. More than 70% of respondents on both courses were over 50 years old, with around 45% more than 66.

“We know that we need to be doing more to attract a new, younger generation of golfers to the game,” Mike continued. “We’re very grateful for the feedback. However, younger players need to be discussed with members and to demonstrate what we are doing for their benefit.

“We now have a benchmark on players’ needs and satisfaction with the Club and the courses, which we could refine and repeat in the future to ensure we are preventing changing demands and meeting what the players want.”

Mike also said it gives us greater opportunity to discuss issues with members and to demonstrate what we are doing for their benefit.

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Golfers’ survey

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key factor for fairway playability was to have the ball sitting proud on the turf surface, with tight mown turf less likely to give the player a good edge. A majority of players commented that the turf surface was key for fairway playability, yet that is the very feature that players spend looking for the need to achieve with cutting heights and management for dense, smooth surfaces.

**Rough challenge**

Across the courses there were adverse comments about the density of the rough, which the team are going to work to address over coming seasons. Mike says: "It may be that we have made the rough just too challenging for players, to the point that it spoiling their game."

"With relatively low scores for satisfaction in aspects such as finding their ball and the ability to play out of the rough, we clearly need to look at ways to open out the rough and encourage a higher proportion of finer, wispy grasses. It shifts the balance between what we see as providing a golfing challenge and defining aesthetically pleasing hole designs using the rough, with the need to maintain playability and enjoyment."

Mike and his team had already been trialling the use of Rescue to remove coarse grasses in the rough and leave desirable finer fescue species. Mike believes these results demonstrated an area of dissatisfaction for some players.

**Attractive proposition**

The survey also looked at what specific courses attracted players to a different course – providing a valuable insight into what might keep members away, as well as elements that could be enhanced to bring in new players.

Mike believed these results demonstrated that investment in new features on the course to improve year-round playability, which was really wanted, as well as elements that could be enhanced to bring in new players.

The design of the golf course unanimously came out as the key factor that attracted them to a course, followed by the aesthetic of the course and the quality of grass. Turf quality on the rest of the course, along with a friendly atmosphere in the club, ranked lower.

**Justifying investment**

Mike acknowledged that the survey highlighted the issue of an ageing of golf population, especially in the South West region where there is a higher proportion of retired players. More than 70% of respondents on both courses were over 50 years old, with around 45% more than 60.

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"What we are looking for is a balance between what we see as providing a golfing challenge and defining aesthetically pleasing hole designs using the rough, with the need to maintain playability and enjoyment."

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"It's an attention to detail that we are working on to further improve the tees, which are always going to prove a key factor in attracting new players, as well as maintaining the interest and satisfaction of existing members."

**Ageing golfers**

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"We now have a benchmark on players’ needs and satisfaction with the Club and the courses, which we could refine and repeat in the future to ensure we are pre-empting changing demands and meeting the players’ wants."

Mike believes these results demonstrated that investment in new features on the course to improve year-round playability, which was really wanted, as well as elements that could be enhanced to bring in new players.

The design of the golf course unanimously came out as the key factor that attracted them to a course, followed by the aesthetic of the course and the quality of grass. Turf quality on the rest of the course, along with a friendly atmosphere in the club, ranked lower.

**Justifying investment**

Mike acknowledged that the survey highlighted the issue of an ageing of golf population, especially in the South West region where there is a higher proportion of retired players. More than 70% of respondents on both courses were over 50 years old, with around 45% more than 66.

"It's an attention to detail that we are working on to further improve the tees, which are always going to prove a key factor in attracting new players, as well as maintaining the interest and satisfaction of existing members."

**Ageing golfers**

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"We now have a benchmark on players’ needs and satisfaction with the Club and the courses, which we could refine and repeat in the future to ensure we are pre-empting changing demands and meeting the players’ wants."

The survey did positively identify that an internet-based questionnaire could reach the older generation, but it may be that a survey for younger players needs to feature shorter questions directly related to topics that interest them, which they could answer quickly. It could also be placed on Twitter or Facebook to encourage greater participation.
How do you make the step up from Assistant to Course Manager? In the first of a two-part special, consultant Kevin Munt gives you a potential roadmap to success.

1. Ambition

Without this you cannot begin your journey so, if you haven’t already, get some!

How do you become ambitious? Well it may be something that was sparked during your childhood or teenage years or you acquired throughout your career. Ambition can be gained out of either a positive or a negative situation. For example, you may have enjoyed playing golf and wanted to make a career out of it.

Alternatively you may not have achieved at school and, as a late developer, have now discovered your niche.

This was certainly my experience when, aged sixteen, my dad read out a job description for Apprentice Greenkeeper in the local paper and said “do this job, then build me a golf course”. So by all means be as ambitious as you like, but don’t let ambition dictate your pace, and don’t ram that ambition down people’s throats.

2. Support

You are not going to make it on your own, you are going to need the support of your family, friends, peers, colleagues, educators and employers, to name an important few.

Let people you trust know of your career plans and they will help you with advice, experience, knowledge and introductions. You will also need their support when you up sticks and move to the next role along your career path.

3. Learning

Before you can take that first step to being the boss there are a large number of course maintenance related topics that you will have to obtain a good understanding of.

This knowledge will be learnt by practical “on-the-job” application, formal college education, and your continued professional development through BIGGA and other management workshops and courses.

The great news is that learning has never been so in depth, available and accessible to greenkeepers.

You should be aiming for a well-rounded knowledge of the many practical and technical aspects of the role. But, for all your advance preparation you will gain the most learning once you have obtained your first Course Manager position.

4. Communication

I could easily have listed this as step 1, as you have to start sharing what you want to achieve straight away. We do not all start out as good communicators; indeed many of us enter greenkeeping because we don’t want to spend all day communicating. We are not natural sales people or marketers, it is something we develop as we grow in our professional lives. In my experience all the awkward, difficult and stressful situations I have found myself in have been caused by miscommunication or non-communication. Remember that good communicators are “influencers”, your main aim as a manager will be to bring your influence to the decision making process and ultimately a satisfactory end result. Some may call this getting your own way but it’s better to get your own way than get in the way! Just be aware of your “two-way” communication skill levels and make sure you improve both enough so that your message is clearly received and understood without harm or offence.

Successful influencers have a strong vision that they support with measurable, achievable delivery targets that form the basis for well-constructed business/operational plans. So do you see yourself as an influencer? If not, you will have to be content with being a passive doer.

5. Golf Skills

This may surprise a few but in my opinion you must be able to play the game to a handicap. Do you think you are going to persuade your employers of your aims for their playing surfaces and course set-up if you don’t understand the skills and nuances of the game? So if you don’t play get some lessons and get out there now, or be prepared to be behind the gain line at interview, if you are lucky enough to get one!

6. Career Path

You may think that this should be listed earlier in these steps. There are (I hope) young greenkeepers out there who already have their hearts and heads set on running a championship course. It may be your plan is to stay at your first course and devote your entire working life to its success, or you may be on the first rung to St Wentingdale G&CC. I don’t believe you can truly set your course management career path in place until you make that first