

Greenkeepers contribute to Open success

SPORTS reporting, and golf is no exception, is regretfully resorting to the banal to cater for a mass readership weaned on sensational headlines rarely relating to the skill of the competitor, more often to his off the ball and preferably bedroom activities.

Screaming black headlines, twice the depth of the story below, sums up the report. Many readers fail to read on, compounding an intended distortion by allowing the imagination to write its own version of the event.

This drive for mass circulation by the popular tabloids is reducing good golf reporting to the few serious national newspapers, the provincial press and the magazines. Which is probably why most of the 700 members of the world's golfing press, packed into their new German built tentage at this year's Open Championship, missed one of the better stories at Royal Lytham St. Annes.

A little judicious questioning, combined with a walk around the course, would have revealed, if not an army, then certainly several platoons of rake carrying, blue trousered and jacketed individuals accompanying every match played over the four days.

In their case it was five days, because whilst others were sheltering from the rain lashing the Flyde Coast these unpaid and mostly unsung heroes were valiantly fighting the elements so play could continue.

We refer of course to the volunteer greenkeepers, most of whom took part of their annual holiday to support Lytham's head greenkeeper Jimmy McDonald during what must have been the most hectic week of his life.

The job of co-ordinating the plan to provide every match with an experienced green-keeper fell to the northern regional administrator, David Golding, a golf course superintendent for Trafford Borough Council.

The story really began a year ago when David drove up to Muirfield to see how Scottish greenkeepers organised their back-up support to the greenstaff at the 1987 Open Championship. This annual event is unlike the other sponsored tour-

naments on the European Tour, as it is the total responsibility of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St. Andrews to stage Britain's premier golf competition, attracting as it now does 200,000 spectators, plus golf's largest global television audience.

The growth of interest in the Open Championship is shown by the fact that only 20 years ago, 50,000 paying spectators was considered a mammoth attendance; now that number can be expected through the turnstiles in one day.

Against this background the head greenkeeper and his comparatively small regular staff have the task of not only preparing a course fit for champions, but maintaining it in the same condition for five days or more, despite the constant pounding from all those spiked feet (golf spectators always seem to arrive in their golf shoes, as if hoping to be invited to play!)

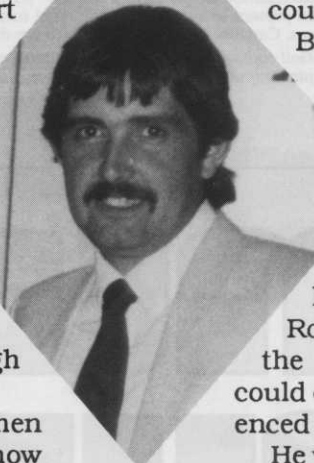
To provide a greenkeeper armed with a rake for every three ball out on the course takes a great deal of organising, though David was not short of volunteers. The difficulties arose because some were able to stay for four days; others, due to commitments at their home courses, could only give a day or two.

All this information had to be logged and co-ordinated to fit in with Jimmy McDonald's own requirements. Royal Lytham is maintained by only seven permanent staff, a far cry from the 30 greenkeepers Bill Spence has at his command as course manager at The County Club, Brookline, where the US Open Championship was held a month before.

Jimmy had a separate list of available assistance from greenstaff at two neighboring golf courses, St. Annes Old Links and Lytham (Green Drive); greenkeepers who had worked the links and knew their way around Royal Lytham. They were familiar with the angles, bumps and hollows and could cut greens and tees with an experienced eye.

He was also helped during the week by Northenden's head greenkeeper, also a previous staff member at Royal Lytham.

Overnight accommodation was arranged and booked for visiting



David Golding

greenkeepers in Blackpool's Pontins Holiday Camp. Not quite to everyone's taste, but acceptable. At least there was always the evening in-camp entertainment for those who wanted to experience a nostalgic touch of Hi-de-hi.

All would have run smoothly had it not been for the unexpected downpour on the Friday night and Saturday morning, adding another two inches of water to the drenching given to the course prior to the final practise day, much to the annoyance of some of the competitors.

Ian Woosnam was said to be very vocal in his criticism, having shot a birdie and an eagle to pull back three shots by the eighth before he was told his morning score would not count. A number of the Americans were equally miffed. They failed to understand why the right equipment was not available to remove standing water, though in fairness to the R & A it is doubtful whether the course could have been made playable, even with mechanised suction rollers, pumps and squeegees.

As it was, no one had anticipated the need for water removal equipment in July. There were a few squeegees in the sheds, but insufficient to make any impression on so much standing water. This is why greenstaff, the Association Chairman among them, were photographed pushing water off the putting surfaces with the back of wooden rakes.

The fire brigade was called in on Saturday evening to pump out the tented village and Jimmy McDonald engaged a private pump contractor to work on the course, helped by his own staff, those from two neighbouring courses and many of Royal Lytham's members, who gave their time and effort unstintingly, throughout the night.

The task of repairing the bunkers, pushing the sand back up the face and re-making to remove the compaction was given to the volunteers from BIGGA.

"They did a great job, starting at 4.30am", said Jimmy McDonald. "It was such a big undertaking after all that rain, it needed an experienced greenkeeper to put the bunkers back in the right condition.

At the end of the tournament tributes were also paid by the Championship

Committee and R & A Secretary Michael Bonallack. Even Seve Ballesteros, the champion, found time to join the greenkeepers for a photograph with the trophy and thank them on behalf of the competitors.

"Lytham has been a spring-board for the Association", said David Golding. "We had a presence at the Open, where greenkeepers were easily recognised wearing the distinctive blue and white of our blazers and badges. This must be good for the future of the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association.

"Our marquee, adjacent to the first tee, was conveniently sited to the hub of events. Near to the administration, the club-house and the tented village, we were very accessible to the many visitors we were able to welcome and keep informed of the aims and ideals of the Association.

"This is just the beginning. We now need to put the work of the golf course manager into greater profile. To give them the opportunity to explain how they prepare golf courses, not only for a tournament such as the Open Championship, but for the club golfer back home".

Next year the Open moves back to Scotland, to Royal Troon on the Ayrshire coast, where the organisation will fall on other shoulders just as broad and willing. Here the service given by the Association will be further improved, according to BIGGA's Executive Director, Neil Thomas. He has promised additional staffing for the practice days when the bunkers are in continuous use.

It is not every greenkeeper who relishes the spotlight, but as active participants in entertainment with a capital 'E', an opportunity for the skills of the greenkeeper to be featured to the golfing public should not be missed.

To this end David Golding is looking for far greater interest from the international golf press, radio commentators and TV journalists. He believes the best story at Royal Lytham could have been told by Jimmy McDonald and his crew at 3am on the Sunday morning, while the boys in the press tent were asleep in their beds; their day's work had finished, revolving around contrived outbursts of criticism from a leading name to build those three inch headlines across the sports pages.

by John Lelean