

David White meets Neil Whitaker, down amongst the sheltering pines of Woburn, and learns how once Poa-dominated greens were transformed into tournament standards of excellence



Woburn's troubleshooter

The world of golf course architecture was robbed of one of its finest when the Scot, Charles Lawrie, died in 1976 at the untimely age of 53. Whilst it is not uncommon for new architects to produce quite routine designs for at least their first couple of tries, Lawrie, who had come to architecture late in years after a 'glittering-prize' lifestyle that included Fettes, Oxford, the Coldstream Guards and amateur golf of a high order, produced two absolute 'corkers' straight from the gun: The championship Duke's and the quite exquisite Duchess, both at Woburn.

One can imagine the thrill that Lawrie and his partner Frank Penninck must have experienced when they first drove through the pine firs that dwarf the narrow lane leading to the Woburn Club, for here undoubtedly was a tract of land that cried out – "build a golf course here". Ten years or so later, Neil Whitaker must have experienced similar tingles of excitement when called upon to mastermind a task that was to thrust him into the high profile maelstrom of championship golf at international level.

Neil's first exposure was anything but peaceful, however, for he was brought in by Woburn's MD Alex Hay specifically to coax the Duke's course back from the brink of a precipice, just seven weeks before the first 'major' – the early season Dunhill Masters – and at a time when the greens were bare, *Poa annua* dominated and decidedly un-tournament like.

Neil's reputation as a trouble-shooter stood him in good stead, he waved his own peculiar spell-binding magic over the Duke's and the rest, as they say, is history. But his was no seven week wonder, for history has a way of repeating itself and each season thereafter has seen Neil's team deliver the goods with skill and aplomb whilst earning unsolicited praise (the only kind worth having) from touring professionals, Seve especially! Whilst it is true that many pro's don't

know their *Poa annua* from their *Agrostis*, apparently they do appreciate good working conditions.

In Neil's case his early season wand-waving continues year long and is witnessed by the thousands who flock to play this little corner of God's Kingdom. Having played with Neil when both courses were at their autumnal best, I was keen to learn more of his maintenance programme and primed him for this later quizzing, which took place in January.

Vigilance is Neil's watchword, for with early tournaments uppermost in his mind (the Ford Ladies Classic lines up in late April!) there is no room for error. Natural vigorous growth is no early bird in Bedfordshire, and an ever watchful eye means that any signs of weakness and possible disease is leaped upon – always prevention rather than cure!

The courses have not been without major problems, notably intensive green compaction that became so acute that rebuilding of several greens was called for, this after trying a number of ways in an attempt to break up the pudding-like sand/silt soil, taken from nearby Birchwood Farm, and laid over an unwashed limestone carpet layer which had literally become solidified. The carpets themselves resisted all attempts to re-open proper drainage, including the unconventional use of road drills!

Rebuilding the greens solved those earlier drainage problems, though a new difficulty now presents itself, that of coping with a jet black root zone mix which has a fondness for congealing and massing and demands Vertidrainning every 6-8 weeks in winter to keep it open and friable. Regular core extraction has also been necessary, the 1" core holes being filled with a 90% sand mix to help bring about a partial soil exchange. With continual top dressing, this has produced a surface which Neil describes as a 'pretty decent' top, ➤



Neil Whitaker and Alex Hay, Woburn's MD, inspect a new mesh element tee

'Greens are overseeded with bents every September and Neil would dearly love to repeat this in April, though tournament demands prevent this happening'

though the underneath remains 'claggy' and demands constant vigilance. A policy of slit-tining every two weeks throughout the winter is followed, bringing worthwhile results.

Bearing in mind that both courses are used for tournaments, we touched on green speed and resultant turf quality. Interestingly on the Duke's, where rapid surfaces are paramount for the Dunhill Masters (a minimum of 9-10 feet on the stimpmeter) and greens are tournament cut at 1/8", there is a greater predominance of *Poa annua*, perhaps as much as 70%, whilst on the Duchess, where cut is restricted to 3/16th, this is reversed, producing sward that is 70% bent/fescue. Neil follows an otherwise identical management programme on both courses, one that includes verticutting and grooming, the implication being that the shorter and twice daily hand mown tournament cut on the Duke's encourages *Poa* domination. Greens are overseeded with bents every September and Neil would dearly love to repeat this in April, though tournament demands obviously prevent this happening. In the speed league he's looked seriously at turf rollers; has had a working demo of the Australian model and is impressed by its results. For 1992 he hopes to use the PGA owned unit from Quietwaters; and who knows, if it works as he thinks it will... maybe he'll get one in 1993?

In 1990 the fairways were wiped-out by drought and subsequently over-seeded with a mix containing 34% mixed Chewings fescue, 45% Creeping red fescue, 10% bents and 10% smooth stalked meadow grass. These fairways receive almost as much attention as the precious greens; and indeed the fairways, tees and greens are all verticut and Vertidrain, cut with fine mowers and receive an application of wetting agent in March. This has definitely paid off, with results showing an encouragingly high percentage of finer grasses in the fairways. The application of wetting agents on fairways may on the face of it appear extravagant, but Neil reckons that subsequent water saving (all Woburn water is metered and the courses have a complete irrigation system) easily justifies this move.

Typically, each January begins with Vertidrain of tees, greens and fairways, repeated again in March (when the irrigation system is re-activated) and followed by wetting agents and the application of a suitable granular slow-release fertiliser. A weekly 'topping only' cut is carried out on greens throughout the dormancy period. Soil tests are evaluated annually to establish any particular weaknesses, the readings indicating that Woburn is low, indeed nearly off the scale, in phosphates and lacking in Potash and Nitrogen. In early April and, temperatures permitting, weekly thereafter, verticutting, grooming and light dressing (70%

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Woburn's play policy during frost is a sound one, demanding the immediate use of properly prepared 100-200 square metre frost greens'

sand/30% loam) is the norm. Given that appearance is important, especially for TV, a spray dressing with a seaweed agent containing Iron is applied before the earliest tournament to give a 'fix' and bring about a greening effect.

Woburn's play policy during frost is a sound one, demanding the immediate use of properly prepared 100-200 square metre frost greens, all created away from the main greens and approaches, either to the left or right. Tee areas are large enough to enable constant tee block re-positioning and the spring programme is aimed at keeping them well drained and open. The dreaded 'black pudding' is found on tees as well as greens, though on the few tees that have been converted with the mesh element created by Netlon, not only is this eliminated, but vastly improved deep rooting is evident. Woburn was the first to try the system and obviously must like it, for they are currently installing six further mesh element tees and will eventually complete every championship tee in like style. Trees abound, predominantly Scotch pine and birch, and whilst they are beautiful; a lot of trees means a lot of work when they shed needles, leaves and cones. For the Ford Ladies Classic this creates extra work raking up tons of the wretched things, the ladies insisting on a fair carpet if they stray from the straight and narrow!

How is all this achieved? By year round dedication from a crew of just twelve greenkeepers plus Neil himself, a fully occupied machinery engineer, Martin Davies; and more recently a full time irrigation engineer, Lee Murdoch. 'Team work is all', says Neil, 'and I am unbelievably proud of every one of them'. Proud he may be, but when one digs below this course manager's apparent modesty another and even deeper burning passion is discovered. It is for the Duke and Duchess as well!

Major machinery and equipment in the Woburn stable

- 1 Atterton and Ellis Dual Express grinder**
- 3 TORO Greensmaster 1000's**
- 2 TORO GM 300's**
- 1 TORO GM 3000 with grooming reels**
- 3 TORO 216's**
- 5 Ransomes 20" Auto Certes**
- 2 Ransomes 180's**
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