



# BEATING THE FREEZE

Early morning blues as Walter Woods surveys the sprinklers at the second green as an attempt is made to clear the last of the rime before play begins

Hosting a big event is never easy and the problems multiply as the weather gets colder. Head greenkeepers

Gordon Moir and Eddie Adams

report from St Andrews



Gordon Moir



Eddie Adams

panies sponsoring national, Scottish and regional events, the presentation and condition has always to be first class. In preparation for the Dunhill, very little extra is carried out other than extra cutting on the days immediately preceding and during the tournament, with the greens being topdressed with a sand/sterilised mixture at the end of September to help smooth and speed up the surface.

One week prior to the event, torrential rain fell from the Wednesday until the Saturday with 35mm on the Thursday alone (October's total average

rainfall!) which severely hampered the preparation work. After two days of dry weather, however, the staff were able to get back to normal.

The first serious headache took place on the Monday morning preceding the event when the greenstaff went out to prepare the course for the first day's practice and discovered that one of The Old Course's three large bunkers, Shell Bunker, had partly collapsed. "The wet weather had undermined the foundation of the revetted face," explained Eddie Adams, head greenkeeper of the Old, "Resulting in the top sinking

three to four feet in the very centre [the face of Shell Bunker measured 15 feet high by 90 feet long]. At such short notice, and with all the other work to attend to, all we could do was bank up the base at the affected area with sand to prevent any further collapse.

"Fortunately, although Shell is a huge bunker guarding both the 7th and 11th greens it doesn't really come into play for the professionals, but it was disappointing from the presentation point of view.

"Ironically we were due to start rebuilding Shell at the beginning of November in preparation for the 1995 Open."

With frosts forecast for every morning of the tournament, Walter Woods, Links Supervisor and Eddie Adams decided to cut all the greens, tees and aprons after play as well as in the mornings just in case the morning frosts prevented any cutting at that time of day.

Wednesday arrived, the day of

An annual event on the PGA European Tour circuit is the Alfred Dunhill Cup at St Andrews which has been held at the 'Home of Golf' since its inception in 1985.

Staging such a prestigious event in Scotland in October is never easy. Normally most greenkeepers are busy making preparations to begin their winter programmes following a season's play with numerous competitions. On the Old Course, after tens of thousands of local and visiting golfers, everything is beginning to look a little tired so when you have professional golfers and a televised tournament, the problems of maintenance and presentation become even harder.

For this particular event, the vagaries of the Scottish weather plagued the greenstaff more than ever before.

Preparation of The Old Course is an ongoing job, and with golfers travelling from all over the world to play the famous links, local club competitions and com-



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The collapsed face of Shell Bunker

the Pro-Am, and the greenstaff were in before first light to enable them to make final checks on their mowers and to be on site ready to start as soon as they could see, as time was all important.

First tee-off was at 8am and even with 10 staff cutting it takes a considerable time to get the large double greens – averaging 5000 square yards – cut in front of the golf. True to form, however, a light ground frost prevented any cutting taking place. The fact they were not cut did not particularly affect the pace of the greens for the Pro-Am. "They had been double cut on Tuesday morning and cut again on Tuesday afternoon and growth at this time of year has almost stopped," said Eddie.

The greens were cut following play late on Wednesday afternoon with Paladins set at 3/16" and a similar situation developed on Thursday morning, the first day of actual competition.

The golf on the Thursday was not due to start until 9.30am, however by 8.30 there was still a considerable rime on the greens. At around 8.45 it was decided to switch the sprinkler system on for a couple of minutes on the first four greens to try to clear the rime and let the staff get started.

By doubling up the cutters and with help from additional staff from the other courses at St Andrews to switch the greens,

staff were able to keep just in front of the first match. Unlike most courses, it is not just a case of cutting 1, 2, 3, 4 etcetera because of the double greens – when the 2nd is cut, the 16th also has to be cut, the 3rd and 15th and so on. On average it takes two men between 25–40 minutes to cut a double green.

"The weather caused such disruption that after a day's work the staff were back in the afternoons until after 6pm," said Eddie. "They excelled in their duties – having to cut the greens in near pitch dark on some occasions."

Friday told a similar story, though not quite so bad, when cutting was able to begin at around 8.15am, but Saturday morning brought a fairly severe frost with the ground remaining hard until well into mid-morning. The start of the golf was delayed from 9 until 12 noon with play

starting from both the 1st and 10th tees. This once again made cutting impossible – in fact it was a struggle to get the holes changed!

The policy of cutting greens in the afternoon was once again to prove beneficial as far as Sunday was concerned – the day dawned with a hard frost. With both the semi-finals and final to be played, golf began at 10am and the Americans clinched the trophy at around 6pm in the gathering darkness.

Despite all the hassles, what did the players make of The Old Course in October? Well such notables as Mark McNulty, Jose-Maria Olazabal, Nick Price and Nick Faldo all thought the greens putted extremely well.

"During the week the greens were cut 12 times at 3/16" with green speeds at the beginning at 8ft and ending at 9ft," said Eddie.

"Although slow compared to what they are used to, both the European Tour and the professionals themselves knew it would be suicide for us to lower the height of cut to increase the speed due to the cold weather.

"It was suggested on the Wednesday that we put on the groomers but I refused to put the greens at risk for a week's golf and an extra foot on the stimpmeter explaining that the speed would increase as the week wore on and that the greens would remain consistent and true.

"Following the event the height is raised to 1/4" but it takes at least 3-4 weeks for the greens to recover and they are only cut once or twice per week. The other main jobs to be tackled are clearing up after the contractors – although through experience this is getting easier every year – and repairing the crowd damage around the perimeter of the course. All traffic routes receive intensive aeration with any areas very badly affected roped off and overseeded in the spring.

"Although it is all a great deal of hard work and hassle the satisfaction of successfully staging such an event and being part of a team including Walter Woods, the staff of the European Tour and the greenstaff at St Andrews all pulling together, makes it all worthwhile."

**Left: 9am on Thursday and cutting finally begins.**

