



Preparing for a major championship



The Bell's Scottish Open is only a four-day event, but the staff at Gleneagles have been preparing for it for 13 years.

Preparations began as soon as Gleneagles became a private company in 1981. Six years later it staged its first championship; now the greenkeepers at the five-star resort – all 34 of them – are set for their eighth event, with many top pros treating it as a warm-up to the Open Championship.

The Bell's Scottish Open at Gleneagles' 80-year-old King's Course has become part of the annual routine for the greenkeepers

there, but it has taken a great deal of effort to get to the stage where everything appears to run smoothly.

When Gleneagles became a private company the first thing they did was refurbish the hotel and invest in a new country club facility. Current owners Guinness have added other sports facilities (such as the Jackie Stewart Shooting School and an equestrian centre), and new maintenance facilities.

Jimmy Kidd, Scott Fenwick and Chris Boiling explain how the staff at Gleneagles stop the Bell's from taking its toll on the King's Course.

As well as transforming the workshops, they also transformed the greenkeeping management structure "to ensure a top quality golf product year round".

Each of the courses (four then but the new Jack Nicklaus-designed Monarch's replaced two of them) was given a head greenkeeper, deputy head greenkeeper, other greenkeepers and apprentices. The King's Course has eight full-time and three seasonal staff,

there are eight greenkeepers on the Queen's and 15 on the Monarch's. Each course has its own machinery and maintenance facility with mess room.

"This new structure immediately created a sense of responsibility and identity amongst the estates staff plus some very healthy competition between the staff and their charges," says Jimmy Kidd, the director of turf-grass management at Gleneagles Golf Developments.

While the new clubhouse, offices, golf shop and computerised golf reservations facilities

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were being built, the King's Course was undergoing some fairly critical assessment to review strategy, playability, crowd movement, television cabling, tented village services, car parking etc.

An estates survey was commissioned and a grand plan with proposals and costings was presented to the managing director for approval. What they were looking for was: crowd comfort, good first and lasting impressions of the event, services such as TV and septic tanks to be hidden, first class car parking with shuttle service to the golf course ("as first impressions are of utmost importance"), and quality catering.

"All of these items are simpler to action and calculate for if you are designing a course today with championships in mind – not, as in our case, the first championship for 20 years and never before with an anticipated 50-60,000 spectators in year one, growing upwards to 115,000 as we're expecting this year," said Mr Kidd, who has been in greenkeeping for 34 years, 11 of which have been at Gleneagles.

Critical assessment of the James Braid-designed course revealed a weakness in length and strategy. Basically, it was an attractive resort course suited to the moderate player and local championships, not world-class events. So 12 new tees were built during the winters of 1983/84, lengthening the course from 6450 yards to almost 6900 yards. The strategy of the course was developed by improved teeing ground placement, taking into account Braid's bunkers which had been taken out of play over the years by the improvements to golfing equipment and maintenance practices.

A conscious decision was taken at this stage also to restore the King's Course bunkers to the original Braid concept: no large wastelands of sand but beautifully contoured grass faces 'gathering' the ball. "The genius of Braid was made apparent to greenstaff at our communications meetings whilst discussing the restoration – not one ounce of wind blown sand from his bunkers on our exposed location was apparent after 70 years of play and maintenance. The grassy swales created in front of them always took account of the prevailing winds," Mr Kidd points out.

Works proceeded on the greens, too, to get them up to European Tour event standard – fast, firm and true whilst holding a well struck shot. This proved difficult to achieve at first in 1983 because years of low investment, poor equipment and a lack of management structure plus over-utilisation of the course had seriously diminished the quality of the holes.

Modern equipment in the form of aerators was brought in to break down the layers of thatch, some of which were 3ins thick and affecting playability – especially during periods of inclement weather. A verti-drain unit with 8in hollow core and 12in x 3/4in and 1/2in solid tines with applied surface 'heave' or 'no heave' was constantly used to introduce air to the rootzone. Greens surfaces

By 1985 the course had been turned around and Gleneagles was ready to stage its first European Tour event, but the bid faltered at contract signing stage. "This was due to a variety of circumstances," explains Mr Kidd, "Not least of which was a poor slot in the ETPD calendar. The late September date was totally unacceptable to a resort golf course in Perthshire where optimum growing conditions only occur four months of the year – June, July, August and September. A major championship in late September/October would certainly not allow any recovery from crowd damage before the next spring."

With a slot for the Bell's Scottish Open established one week prior to the Open Championship, the King's Course, which had

maintenance route and during championship week for service and TV vehicles and as a walkway for spectators. But no-one wanted it to ruin the aesthetic appeal of the course. As it is, the roadway is difficult to see from the playing areas.

During the construction of this roadway, ancillary services such as water, sewage and television requirements were installed. The area designated as the tented village site was surveyed and a grid survey produced from which all future works could be planned. The most important first stage to any tented village facility is the provision of services: water, electrics, telephone and sewers. A set of services to suit all types of village layouts was installed, and these would allow simple connections during assembly of the tentage and hospitality units. Two 36,000 ltr underground tanks were also installed.

All car park gateways were widened to accommodate the PGA's recommended principle of two cars in, one out. Boundary fences were renewed and repaired for security and to maximise gate receipts.

The Gleneagles Hotel's own gardens department, which grows 40,000 plants in a 36,000 sq ft glasshouse, was instructed to prepare the floral decor of the tented village.

Once the first competition had come and gone successfully, all the departments settled into a routine, with the greenkeepers keeping their fingers crossed each winter and spring. With Gleneagles situated in a Scottish glen, there is a risk of prolonged snow falls with relatively high air and ground temperatures increasing the risk of snow moulds. "Preventative treatments of fungicide December to March are our only defence," says Jimmy Kidd, "But do not guarantee no incidence, resulting in poor spring conditions and little recovery prior to July at this altitude."

If there has been a favourable winter and comforting spring, preparations for the tournament commence with insecticide sprays for leatherjackets and a light dressing of organic nitrogen, applied to the greens during the 'false spring' in late March, to bring the grasses out of dormancy and protect what they have until

After the tournament

Within 48 hours of the championship, things are back to normal with guests, members and hotel residents carving up the course once more.

After the tournament, the greens are left for a week and may get an application of liquid feed "to kick them back in" according to head greenkeeper Scott Fenwick. They will be

overseeded in early August using a straight bent mix applied with a Sisis seeder. Then they will be topdressed and mowed at a higher height to protect the seeds. The fairways are overseeded using a fescue/bent mix.

After the tournament all the walkways are spiked, verti-drained and fertilised.

were topdressed during periods of active growth with sand dredged from the bed of the River Tay, which is similar to the sand found at St Andrews.

In conjunction with this operation, greens were droughted carefully to reduce the level of Poa annua at a controlled rate whilst encouraging the encroachment of bent and fescue into the putting sward.

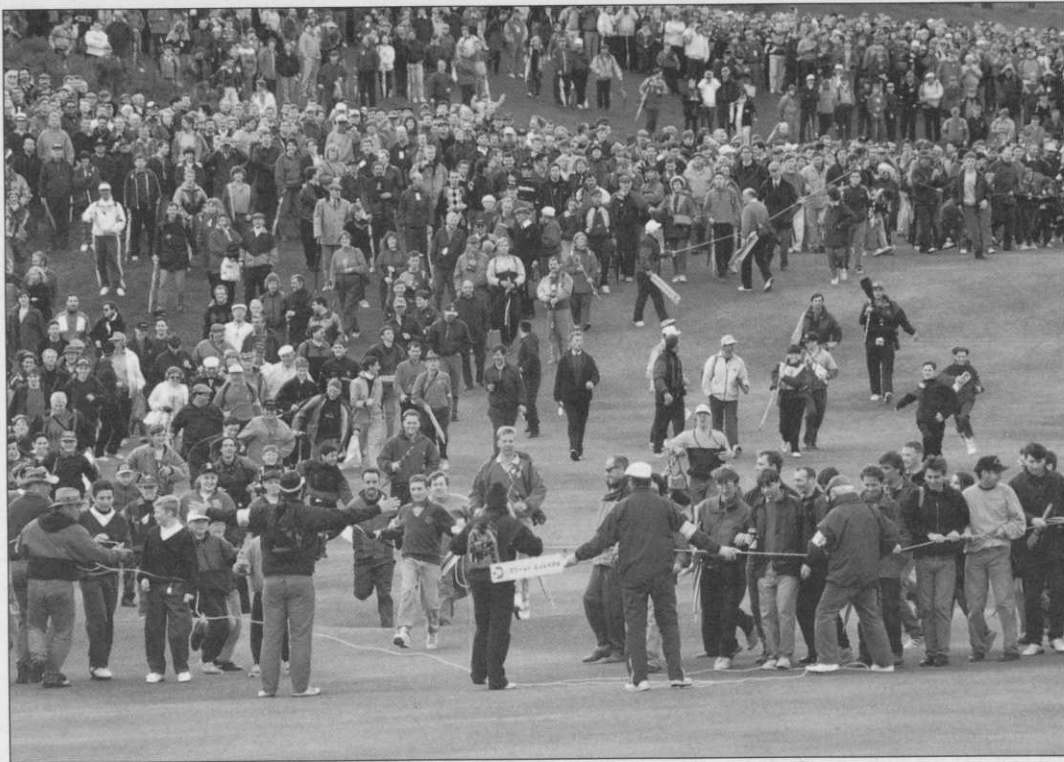
Regular use of wetting agents, to aid capillary water movement and avoid surface tension during this phase of the restoration was most important, as was the avoidance of an out-of-control situation, with the Poa kill accelerating beyond the pace of the desired species encroachment. Fertiliser applications, little and often, hardening off the growth to attain hard-wearing grasses. "Greenkeeping working in harmony with nature," as Mr Kidd calls it.

already been described as "the finest inland links course", was made more links like with a fairway restoration programme that incorporated similar topdressings as the greens – medium/fine Tay sand.

Some 1,200 tons of sand were applied during the summers of '86 and '87.

Cutting regimes were directed and controlled by the use of hole-by-hole charts and on-the-ground contour lining to accentuate the topography of the course and improve the strategy. Each green was to be enfringed by "fat" grass incorporating greenside bunkers, each green approach was to be of a quality equal to the putting surfaces.

During the winter of '86/'87, an integral roadway system through the championship course was designed, costed and constructed. It was to be used year-round as a



real growth occurs, generally mid to late May.

No greens topdressing will take place until ground temperatures rise and there are some indications of natural growth. Once the ground temperature reaches approximately 42 degrees and some real bent grass growth occurs naturally, a consistent and regular topdressing programme is initiated to within three weeks or less of the actual event, coupled with a light verti-cutting programme every 7-10 days. Scott Fenwick, the course's head greenkeeper, says the greens receive about eight topdressings – "fortnightly depending on the weather" – starting in April and using five parts sand, one part peat. All greens approaches receive similar treatment to the greens. Generally, the greens are hollow-cored in September, verti-drained in November and spiked from February onwards.

Fairways will be verti-cut and topdressed regularly, too. Peat is added to the high ridges.

One application of a slow release granular fertiliser at the start of the season is backed up with an early summer dressing of organic nitrogen applied six to eight weeks prior to the event and, thereafter, they use an organic nitrogen liquid feed coupled with a wetting agent and trace elements.

The height of cut on all areas will be gradually reduced. The greens, for example, will come down from 5/16th over the winter to 1/4in, to 3/16 to 5/32 then down to 1/8in. The greens are cut as required over the winter, maybe once a month. Once

growth starts they are cut twice a week. From about the end of April it is stepped up to three or four times a week, and during the summer it is daily. During the event they will be cut two or three times a day, depending on the speed. Greens like the 1st with severe slopes will miss a cut if they are too fast. "The idea is to get them all the same speed," says Scott. Speeds are monitored weekly from May onwards, and daily with a fortnight to go.

The tees come down from 5/16th to 1/4in, with the cutting stepped up during the growing season from three times a week to daily the week before and during the tournament. Fairways come down from 1/2in in winter to 3/8in in the summer. In the winter they're cut every 4-6 weeks. Once there is some growth they are cut weekly, then 2-3 times a week and from ten days out they are cut daily with a Jacobsen LF100. Divots are filled all season but the programme is increased from weekly to daily as the tournament nears. The green approaches are slightly shorter than the fairways at 3/16ths.

The rough is never cut and the semi rough varies from 1 1/4 to 2ins.

Seed head suppression of the *Poa annua* percentage within the sward is the greenstaffs' main concern prior to the event. They achieve this by limiting the pressure applied to the plant – as the height of cut is lowered, droughting is effected and nitrogen levels drop. A pre-tournament 'cocktail' liquid feed comprising 20 ltrs liquid Alginure, 10 ltrs Farmura Green and 5 ltrs Aqua-Gro mixed

in 250 ltrs of water per acre is prepared and sprayed, both to reduce seed head production and discourage dew on greens, tees and fairways.

The minimum amount of water is used, with the irrigation carefully monitored and any dry spots on the severely undulating greens hand-watered. Wetting agents are used monthly during the growing season.

As the competition approaches, the whole course is put under a microscope for prospective 'ground under repair' areas – the aim being not to use any white paint.

The bunkers are not only trimmed and re-sanded as required, but also 'pro-tested' which, in 1987, resulted in 22 greenkeepers working around the clock to take sand out of 110 bunkers. Now they aim for depths of 4ins of sand in the base and 2in up the faces.

The spectator crossing points and paths, which are regular verti-drained, deweeded, sprayed and edged during the season, are given a freshen up.

A month prior to the championship, play on the King's Course is cut back to about 60 per cent and totally banned between the hours of 3 and 6pm. In the evenings it is restricted to members and hotel residents only. The course closes completely for two days only prior to the first practice round.

During the competition the King's Course greenkeepers are backed up by the staff from the Queen's and Monarch's courses. The staff arrive on site at 4.15 for a 4.30am start and work until about 8am. After play they come

back at 5 or 6pm and work till 10 or 10.30pm. Greens are prepared by pedestrian mowers – Ransomes Auto-certex with brush attachments – each evening following play and each morning. Green approaches are done every morning, tees and fairways each evening using lightweight ride-on units and Triplex tee mowers.

All tee and fairway divots are filled with seed and sand mix each evening after cutting, to avoid smear.

"It can be a lot of hassle leading up to it but when it's all done it's all worth it. When you see what you've produced on the TV, it's quite satisfying," says Scott, who is preparing for his fourth Bell's Scottish Open.

If you want to know, look in the Bell's Bible

■ All the information relating to the competition and its aftermath is kept in a "Bell's Bible", formed by Jimmy Kidd given to all the key personnel at Gleneagles, including golf course superintendent Ross Monaghan and Scott Fenwick. The folder is divided into 31 sections, with separate sections for all the information relating to, for example, King's Course preparations, practice area preparation, wet weather systems and contacts, key contacts, floral decor, and tented village/build schedule/breakdown schedule. Everything seems to be in it, including details of tickets and pricing because golfers are just as likely to ask greenstaff how they can get a ticket and how much it will cost.

The King's Course preparation section includes a 'general tasks checklist' which includes appraising stairways, pathways, septic tanks, course furniture, spectator walkways, tees netting, bog mire, hole cups and TV compound, ordering what's necessary and putting dates down for when the work started and was completed. It also acts as a reminder to raise maintenance orders for the bridges, shelters and tee fences.

When you're holding a major event each year, it's easier to build up this information and these checklists. But it means nothing is overlooked or left to chance. And it means that the Bell's doesn't take its toll on the course or staff.