

OPEN

Chris Boiling talks to Turnberry course manager George Brown to find out what's in store for contestants in this year's Open Tournament

George Brown has been in greenkeeping for 40 years. He started at Princes, Sandwich, straight from school at the age of 15. He was there nine years. "When I went there I was the boy with 11 groundstaff. When I left nine years later I was still the boy...I thought I could do better for myself."

His next job was as the greenkeeper/pro at nine-hole Alton, in Hampshire. "Someone bet I could do it, I didn't think I could, but I applied for the first job that came along, it happened to be Alton and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was fantastic experience. The members were very kind to me."

He stayed for three years with one tractor and one mower. He'd cut the greens, then go and cut the tees. Then give a lesson.

He went back to Princes as the gaffer and stayed for five years. Then in 1979 he joined Broome Park Golf and Country Club near Canterbury to oversee its construction and stayed on as golf manager – which meant running the whole complex, including the bars and restaurants.

In January '86 he moved to Turnberry to prepare for the Open. Eight years later he is still there and preparing for his second Open.

Having been a pro and Kent amateur champion, we wondered if he'd ever thought about going further on the pro side. "No, I made so much money when I was 24 I decided I'd made enough to pull out of it," he jokes. "No, seriously, I had no training as a pro, I did it as a bet." He now plays off 4.

Who can forget the 1977 Open, with two of the sport's all-time greats, Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus, in peak form deciding the championship on the 18th green? Who can forget the 1986 Open, when Greg Norman battled against the wind and rain to claim his first major title?

Turnberry is hoping for an equally memorable tournament this year when it stages its third Open. And course manager George Brown is hoping for conditions and scores somewhere between the two earlier events.

In 1977 when Tom Watson won with a four-round aggregate of 268, it was hot and dry. In '86, Norman shot his level par 280 amid gale-force winds.

George Brown wants Turnberry to be a fair challenge – a stiff breeze and sunshine would be ideal with the top players shooting 67s and 68s. Without a breeze he reckons they could shoot low 60s, like Mark Hayes in '77 and Norman in '86, or even a 59. With too strong a wind many of them will struggle to break 80. Planning to be fair is going to be a problem.

"It's very difficult to set up a links fairly because if they play it how it is today, with no wind, they will shoot low 60s or even something silly like a 59. There's nothing wrong with that. We don't mind them doing that but if it weakens the course too much then some people may say it's not good enough to hold the Open.

"It's a question of getting the balance, that's what we're looking for at the moment."

That's why there have been a few minor modifications to the course.

"These golfers are so good now, they hit the ball so far, you have to keep making a few changes to keep up with them," explains George, 55, a top amateur player in his younger days.

The main differences from '86 are new bunkers on the opening two holes and 17th and wider fairways.

"After the '86 Open we thought the first fairway was a wee bit too narrow. Some of the top-class players were hitting an iron off the tee, even as low as a 4 iron, which we didn't think was the right way to start a championship. So, after a bit of thought and discussion and professional advice from an architect, we widened the fairway to the left and put two bunkers there to make it a challenging tee shot, and we tightened up the greenside bunkers. You can still lay up short of the bunkers if you have a head wind. If there's no wind or a back wind then you can easily carry them or there's a 20-yard gap if you fancy threading the ball through the middle. So it's a much fairer hole."

There are also two new bunkers on the second. "We thought the second hole was a wee bit weak so we added bunkers left and right to tighten up the tee shot. Again there's about an 18-20-yard gap if you fancy taking a chance. It'll make the players think for the Open, especially if there's a back



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TO IDEAS

wind, whether to hit a wood or lay-up with an iron."

The bunker that was out in the rough on the par 5 17th – "which no-one ever seemed to go in" – has been filled in and a new one built on the edge of the fairway to catch a slightly wayward tee shot. "I think this will play a major role in the eventual winner of the Open Championship. Again there's 18-20-yards on the left if you fancy driving past it."

"Par 5s on links courses in the summer can play short, but this bunker may make them think."

Wider fairways

All the fairways are a few paces wider. "The criticism from the '86 Open was the width of the fairways. They were too narrow. One of the most vigorous growing seasons we've ever had made the rough very dense and to add salt to the wounds we had horrendous weather for three out of the four days," recalls George.

More obvious differences between Turnberry when Norman first won a major and when he returns in July to defend his Royal St George's triumph are the new £4.5m clubhouse (opened by the Duke of York last June), the new leisure centre annexe to the hotel, and the fact that the 360-acre site, two courses and three-storey hotel have been taken over by a golf-orientated Japanese company.

Preparing for two years

George Brown and his team of 18-20 staff have been preparing for the Open for the last couple of years. But because it is attached to a 132-room, five-star hotel, it has to be kept in tiptop condition 52 weeks of the year anyhow. They have ongoing maintenance programmes

so that when the Open comes around "we don't have to do a lot different."

"It's just like when the mother-in-law comes over for tea on Sunday, it's just that little bit extra effort."

They have revetted 90 percent of the 66 bunkers over the last two winters (the other 10 per cent were done three years ago and do not need redoing). They will top-dress more frequently to ensure a smooth surface and step up their divotting programme (using caddies and paying them with free rounds on the Arran course).

"Presentation is the key. We're looking for perfection. But it doesn't matter how many hours we work or what jobs we do, at the end of the day there'll still be a few jobs we'd wish we'd done or hadn't quite got round to. It's like a garden, you never actually finish."

But he has had more time to prepare for the 123rd Open than he did for his first one in '86. He took over as Turnberry's course manager seven months before the championship following the death of Russell Brown. George said he seemed to spend most of his time trying to track down underground services and eliminate damage. But now he has detailed plans to help him.

The condition of the fairways, tees, greens and bunkers was great in '86. "Hopefully it will as good, if not in better, in '94," he says.

But don't expect it to look all green and lush. George does not believe that green is necessarily beautiful. "In early summer and autumn when the fairways and whole golf course is green and striped it does look rather beautiful. But when you have a dry spell for a week or two and the wind gets up off the sea, it can go very dusty and strawy and looks unkept at times. There's nothing wrong with

that, links are supposed to be fairly natural and fiery and supposed to have firm fairways. But now we have a new watering system, installed a couple of years ago, and hopefully with proper management we'll be able to strike the balance of not making it too lush and green and not making it too strawy and dusty and looking unkept. I see my role here as trying to keep a balance and keeping it links condition – firm and fast – but presented nicely."

In 1988 Turnberry was taken over by the Japanese company Nitto Kogyo which owns about 30 courses in Japan and several more in America and has just opened The Oxfordshire near London. All of their other courses are green and heavily watered.

"I see my role here as trying to keep Turnberry traditional," George reassures us. "This is the first links course that Nitto Kogyo have owned and it would be very easy for me with my irrigation computer to press a few buttons and step up the water and I have the budget to pile on the fertiliser to make it green and lush, but I refrain from doing that. We don't want a course like '77 where it is a struggle to keep grasses alive during the drought season, but then we don't want to be like American courses where you play target golf on soft, holding greens. I look at my role as trying to keep it 'down the middle', if you pardon the pun – traditional but well presented."

George says his new bosses have been very supportive. They have renewed most of his machinery and provided a new 10,000 sq ft maintenance facility with spacious 'bothy', showers, drying room, soil bays, purpose-built chemical stores, and a proper workshop with grinders and hydraulic lift for his full-time mechanic. ➔

tea on Sunday,





The new clubhouse at Turnberry, officially opened last June by the Duke of York

Sand blow

One of the biggest problems in recent years has been sand blow. For four or five years running in January or February ferocious winds from the Atlantic blew sand from the beach up over the 30-40ft dunes protecting the course and upto 50 yards inland. "You couldn't stand anywhere near the sixth green or 7th tees, the sand would almost cut your face to pieces. We've had as much as 2-3ft of sand on the 7th tees." Which, as you can imagine, destroyed the tees, and didn't do much to enhance the 6th and sometimes 5th greens. The greenstaff have wasted a lot of time shovelling and sweeping sand off the course. "Two years ago the whole squad spent two weeks pushing sand, got it all cleared up, then three weeks later it was back again, which is rather soul destroying." One year they even resorted to using a helicopter which hovered over the 6th green to dry the sand, making it easier to brush off without damaging the greens.

They tried planting marram grasses, but they disappeared with high tides. Then last year they installed snow fences (500 yards worth) in short sections pointing out to sea like groyne. It seems to have done the trick. "This is the first year in six years that we haven't had any sand blow, so we're pleased with that. And we're going into the summer with the 6th green and 7th tees looking quite good for a change. That was my only concern..."

Shaping up

The contractors moved in at the beginning of April and started laying the cables for the tented village which will be sited on the practice area between the two courses. This means the second hole of the Arran course becomes the practice ground with a grandstand and the 18th green on the Arran is used for additional putting practice. Grassy hol-

lows near it are to be turned into practice bunkers and the green extended.

The course closes at the end of June for final preparations - divotting, seeding, top-dressing etc.

Between now and then George will be involved in many meetings with the R&A, BBC and various contractors. He will be working closely with the contractors in planning the sites for about 39 static cameras, the routes for the grandstand erectors, the water and electricity pipes and the digging of big holes for septic tanks.

"It makes the day go round and it keeps us all occupied. Greenkeeping is just one part of it," he says in his usual laid-back manner.

During Open week he will be getting up at 3.30am to phone the Met Office at 3.40 - and plan his cutting regime accordingly. If it is going to be hot and windy he may leave the grass on the greens slightly longer, "otherwise it will be like putting on glass."

The week after the Open is more of a problem for George. "When the Open's finished, all the contractors etc want to do is get their material away from here onto the next site. Obviously

they're not so careful taking it down as they were putting it up. That's when most of the damage can be done to the ground, especially if we turn away."

Once the Open is over, George can start planning the other big jobs that need doing, like additional landscaping around the clubhouse and upgrading the Arran course in readiness for the 1996 British Amateur event which will be played over both courses - qualifying on the Arran and the finals on Ailsa.

"It's one big merry-go-round," says a contented George, who also has a big personal golfing date to look forward to - his debut in the British Seniors in August, along with St Andrews' Walter Woods.

George Brown on bunkers

"If you get in a bunker there is no written rule that you're supposed to get up and down for two or that you can hit a 5 iron out. Sometimes you will have to hit a sand iron and be content with 10-60 yards. If you get in a bunker it should cost you a half to one shot.

"Bunkers are not just visual things, they're here for a purpose."

MAIN MACHINERY AT TURNBERRY

Tractors/vehicles

- 1 Kubota L4150
- 1 Kubota 5450
- 1 Kubota L3250
- 2 Kubota L2850
(one with front bucket and back hoe)
- 4 trailers
- 1 Ford 1910
- 4 Cushman (2 diesel, 2 petrol)
- 1 Kawasaki Mule
- 1 Yamaha Buggy
- 1 Daihatsu FourTrak

Mowers

- 2 Toro 300 D Greens Master
- 4 Jacobsen Greens King
- 2 Jacobsen Tri-King
- 1 Jacobsen LF100
- 1 Ransomes Hydraulic 6
- 2 Ransomes Motor 180
- 1 3 Ransomes Magna
- 1 Ransomes Rota
- 3 Ransomes Marquis
- 2 Ransomes Super Certes
- 6 Lloyds Palladin
- 2 Lloyds Ariel
- 1 Lloyds (trailed)
- 2 Fairway Spikers
- 1 Toro Greens Aerator
- 1 Ryan Mataway Overseeder
- 1 Charterhouse Bulk Fairway Top-dresser
- 1 Verti-drain

