

Guardian of the Links

Walter Woods is gearing up for his fourth and final Open Championship – and his course is already in great shape. Scott MacCallum reports from St Andrews

There are some jobs which are the ultimate in their field. I'm not talking about being paid vast sums for doing not a lot or even one of those bizarre jobs which we know don't really exist but for which we've had a secret hankering anyway – like Chief Sun Tan Lotion Applier on Baywatch.

No, I mean a job where you are in constant touch with greatness and gives you the chance to leave your mark in some small way. There are a few people lucky enough to have one of these jobs – keeper of the Crown Jewels; mechanic on a Williams Renault Formula 1 car; trainer for the Brazilian football team; editor of *Greenkeeper International*; chef at the Savoy Hotel; caddie to Laura Davies. All of these positions give the holder a privileged chance to walk in the shadow of greatness and in some small way help it along its way.

Another of the jobs belongs to Walter

Walter and Head Greenkeeper Eddie Adams discuss the work ahead



Woods who, as Links Superintendent at St Andrews, is guardian of the most revered stretches of golfing land in the world. During his 21 years at St Andrews Walter has seen his greenkeeping skills not only come of age but mature to the extent that he is one of the most respected figures in the business.

Approaching his fourth, and final, Open Championship – he retires at the end of the year – Walter is confident that the man who joins his elite club of Champions – Jack Nicklaus, Seve Ballesteros and Nick Faldo – will have climbed to the peak of the leaderboard on a course as close to perfection as nature would allow.

“There is something about the Old Course which brings out the best in the best player of the time and they always appreciate the way the course is set up and hopefully it will be the same this time,” said Walter in his office deep in the heart of the hallowed links.

“Coming up to my fourth Open I worry about it just as much as I did the first. I've been lucky to have had good Opens and touch wood I'll have another one again but the pressure is so much greater now than it was in my first Open in '78. Just look at the amount of money riding on it. It attracts millions to an area, possibly as much as £15 million to this area, and there can be so much riding on just one putt.

“It means huge responsibility on the greenkeeper. If the tented village blows down it can be put up again but if there is something wrong with the course it can crucify you.”

You get a strong feeling of cautious confidence talking to Walter about The Open because he knows that however much you prepare and no matter how good you are it can sometimes go wrong.

With an Open Championship, however, there is very little left to chance thanks to the R&A and its hugely experienced staff who offer as much back-up as any greenkeeper could possibly want.



From two years before the Championship the greenkeeper is working closely with the R&A and its team with the emphasis very much on working together as a team.

“You won't get the R&A stipulating width of fairway or speed of the green for a championship. The Championship committee meets the greenkeeper many months before and will ask his opinion about how he thinks the course should set up. If the committee has anything to say it will do so right there and then. The R&A has its own agronomist and he is very knowledgeable and experienced. He's got a broad outlook on all the championship courses.

“The greenkeeper is ultimately responsible but he gathers knowledge from every area. When it comes to your greens you know that they have got to be firm and that the grass has got to be on the lean hungry side during the tournament.

“The only thing that can create a problem is the weather and you have to be prepared to expect anything to happen and be in a position to cope. Forecasting is extremely good nowadays but on a links the wind can whip up suddenly and dry the course out very quickly,” said Walter, before adding that at St Andrews they have wall to wall irrigation and a huge 357,000 gallon reservoir to draw on.

This year a radical new technique has been applied to ensure that the course will be seen



at its best for the Championship.

"At St Andrews we always attract a lot of visitors. It's the home of golf and people from all over the world want to come and play and divots are one of our biggest problems. A few years ago Carnoustie began using astroturf mats and we thought we'd follow suit. We use an oblong piece of astroturf a foot by six inches and a tee peg in it and the players carry them with them and this has helped us quite dramatically, because our fairways are virtually divot free. They are looking quite different from anything I've ever seen. They are absolutely perfect."

The mats have led to some strange sights on the Old Course with some innocent visitors using them on the greens and even in bunkers while many mats have joined tins of shortbread and tartan bonnets as valued souvenirs.

Walter is lucky to have a fine team of young greenkeepers working under him who will all be available to add weight to the Open preparations in addition to their own work on the other St Andrews courses.

"I've got five head greenkeepers and they are responsible for their own course through me. Eddie Adams is Head Greenkeeper for the Old Course."

Born and bred in St Andrew Eddie began his career in St Andrews and he works closely with Walter.

"I've groomed Eddie to think on the tradi-

tional lines and he now thinks how I think," Walter chuckles. "He's learned the old fashioned ways. For instance when we spread fertiliser we don't use a spreader we do it by hand. I've taught all my young men to spread by hand.

"You might think it dirty and slow but it keeps your fertiliser down to a minimum, is a skilful way of applying it and you're guaranteed not to make a mistake. The one way a greenkeeper is sure to lose his job is to make a mistake. So you do everything on a championship course with patience with skill and how you are taught from the people who have done it before. Now Eddie has learned those things he puts it into practice and he is coming into a championship with a great deal of responsibility."

During the Championship Walter will also have the help of the BIGGA Greenkeeping Support team consisting of 45 British greenkeepers, two from Sweden and one from the USA who walk with every match to rake bunkers and generally assist with the evening divoting.

"The Greenkeeping Support Team started at the Open in '84 but when BIGGA was formed and took over the organising of it it has gone from strength to strength," said Walter, BIGGA's first Chairman.

In addition to The Open every five years or so Walter has prepared the Old Course for ten

Alfred Dunhill Cups which involved having the course in tip top shape in late October when many other courses are put down to sleep for the winter.

"Greenkeeping has reached a stage where we can do virtually anything at any time. Not only has knowledge improved and I've learned from greenkeepers all over the world but huge strides have been made in machinery.

"I've got triplexes which can cut beautifully. I've got aeration machines that can aerate leaving barely no marks. I've got machines which can aerate down to 16 inches, unknown years ago."

Working at the Golfing Mecca means that Walter must prepare the course at the same time as thousands of golfers are enjoying their once in a lifetime visit but he doesn't see that as an inconvenience.

"It gives me great satisfaction that we can prepare a championship course in superb condition and still be open to thousands of visitors. Anybody can have a great golf course if nobody is playing on it, but just think how great it is to prepare it for lots of people to enjoy golf at the same time. How many people have come to St Andrews and taken up the game?"

It's a thought which obviously gives Walter great pleasure.

Pictured: St Andrews' wall-to-wall irrigation system in action.

Photographs by Scott MacCallum