

# Preparing



Who will be on cloud nine after this year's Open? Picture by Brian Morgan

# tees fit for a Queen

**Jimmy MacDonald has seen it all before and he knows you do that little bit more when The Open pays a visit.**

The Open Championship, the pinnacle of the golfing year, is just six weeks away and the Head Greenkeeper of Royal Lytham and St Annes is in his office looking as relaxed as one would if it were the Club Championship that was just over the horizon.

Jimmy MacDonald is that type of character. Nothing much fazes him. Well why should it? He's already been Head Greenkeeper at three Opens and four Senior Opens, been Deputy at another Open, and also has a Ryder Cup and a Curtis Cup under his belt. He also coped with what would be many greenkeepers biggest nightmare during an Open.

"I'm led to believe that I'm the only living greenkeeper to have had both the Ryder Cup and The Open Championship."

For all that his Championship CV is unrivalled Jimmy had one regret.

"I'd have loved the Walker Cup. It would have completed the set for me and I'm sure we would've done well here because, other than amateur Bobby Jones, no American has ever won The Open at Lytham."

At 62 this will be Jimmy's final Open. "I feel I've just walked off the 17th and I haven't had many double bogeys but I haven't had many birdies either – I reckon I'm about level par," is his modest assessment of a career which changed course dramatically at the age of 27 after he had trained and lectured in ceramics.

It's his reserved and measured West Highland way and one which is ideal for coping with the conditions which are being thrown at him.

"With the drought of last year followed by a spring the like of which I've never experienced before it wasn't scary but it was slow. People have asked what I think will happen to the course but not many greenkeepers have experienced this so a lot of it is guesswork. You don't know what's going to be thrown at you," said Jimmy.

In those circumstances, although it is a new situation, experience is all the more important.

"We've had Fusarium on the odd green but I know that in '69 we had an extremely bad attack of it and it filled in in time and I'm relaxed in the knowledge that it should be fine by the middle of July."

The drought of last summer caused Jimmy and his team to assess the damage at the end of the year and put in place the measures necessary to bring the course to its peak for July.

"We used irrigation and over sowed many of the fairways. I'd have done some of the areas anyway but with The Open coming up I probably did about four times as much as I would have done normally.

"We did a tremendous amount of spiking



The greenkeeping team at Royal Lytham and St Annes. Jimmy MacDonald is pictured fourth from the right

and vertidrainning through the winter. I try to keep it simple and not be tempted to feed too early. Unfortunately I have the Lytham Trophy in May which is a big amateur event and I was tempted to cut a bit closer but I had to resist. As it was the course was not as good as it has been for other years for the event but it's a general feeling throughout the country."

Another area to which Jimmy pays particular attention in the run up to an Open is the fertiliser programme.

"I never want to overfeed although I know people would be tempted because of the weather situations but in the main we don't do anything differently to a normal year.

"We just maybe spent a little more time on jobs than usual. We keep the greens at a reasonable height as a little insurance, divot the fairways more regularly and cut bunker banks more regularly but perhaps not as close," he explained.

He goes on to explain the philosophy.

"If your dear old aunt was visiting you'd made a damn good tea but if the Queen were coming you'd do it a wee bit differently, wouldn't you?"

Like many, Jimmy has detected a slight change in the seasons which has perhaps accounted for some of the weather we've been experiencing.

"I've been looking through one or two old diaries from the 50s that are in the club. Things have changed. They mention 'gang mowers off for winter service mid October.' Not now they are still cutting. The change in standards may have something to do with it but they also mention greens being mown

three or four times a week in mid April so it looks as though the seasons have shunted just a little bit."

Being in an ideal position to reflect on the job of a greenkeeper he does feel that improved machinery has made it easier.

"But you still go out to a bunker like I did 30 years ago with a rake a brush and a shovel. When you build bunkers with reveted walls you still build them with the same tools.

"It is nice to see a young apprentice lay a turf and you watch as he pulls the top of it – just a little thing. I can remember the old man who taught me it the same way. The little things have carried on through the traditional elements. Being a Celt the traditional and folklore was important."

He is also immensely proud of his home nine hole course at Traigh in the West Highlands where he assisted in some rebuilding work. The 4th hole a 247 yard par-4 is called "Jimmy's Choice" after him.

"On the back nine on the scorecard it is called "Jimmy Choice" in Gaelic so I really have two holes named after me," he says proudly.

Among the other work carried out this year in advance of the Championship has been the complete rebuilding of 56 of the 185 bunkers to go along with the 50 which were done last year.

Work on developing a borehole is also well advanced and it is hoped that they'll be able to extract up to 80,000 in 12 hours, enough for one night's watering.

"It's not enough to keep them green in a drought situation too long. It's only survival kit – it'll still go brown but will recover faster after rain."

# Preparing tees fit for a Queen

Ah rain! This brings me to the situation at the last Lytham Open in 1989 which would have had many lesser men reaching for the strait jacket and voluntarily admitting themselves to the padded cell.

The Saturday of the '89 Open was completely washed out and Royal Lytham became the only venue to have had the final day of the Championship played on a Monday.

"In the end we made more friends than enemies by getting it right," recalled Jimmy.

"I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. I'd never seen anything like it before or since."

After a full day's torrential rain Jimmy and his Green's Chairman left the course at half past midnight.

"We left some pumps running and at that stage we weren't winning. It was stalemate. I went home and dozed in my chair and when I got back to the course at half past four what I saw was unbelievable – 80% of the water had gone. It must have stopped raining while I'd been dozing and while I was away the water must have penetrated the crust on top of the ground because the drains were empty."

Pressure was put on to start as soon as possible but Jimmy resisted and play resumed at 11am in threeballs.

"There wasn't a pool on the course. I felt the course that year was as good as I've ever had it

## THE GREENKEEPING TEAM

Head Greenkeeper: Jimmy MacDonald

Deputy Head Greenkeeper: Tom Knowles

Assistants: Phil Medcalf, Dave Throup, Richard Aitken, Mark Davies, Phil Ruffley and Paul Smith.

Apprentice: Andrew Webb

and if it hadn't rained and the sun had shone the greens would have been as good as I could possibly have wanted them. I've got video of all the Opens I've been involved in and watching the film of '89 the putts were rolling as truly as they could possibly go."

It says much for the condition of the golf course that year that it will always be remembered for the brilliance of Seve and his wonderful chip on the final hole to seal it against Nick Price.

"Wouldn't it be nice for Seve to win it at Lytham for a third time," said Jimmy, who is the proud owner of the flag from the 18th signed by Seve as well as a flag signed by both teams from the '61 Ryder Cup.

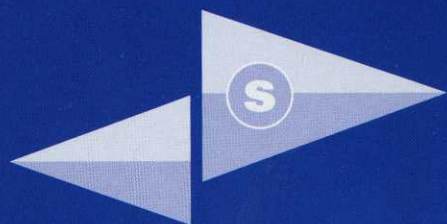
As in previous years Jimmy will be assisted during the week of the Championship by his

excellent team of eight – one more than last time – and his "Old Boys" – Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers at neighbouring courses who all worked under Jimmy either at Lytham or at Formby where he was Head Greenkeeper before returning to Lytham.

Chris and Geoff Whittle, from Royal Birkdale and St Annes Old Links respectively, Peter Simpson, from Fairhaven and Mark Broughton, from Morecombe, and possibly his son Derek from Formby supplement the existing team for the week and their local knowledge and general experience means Jimmy is happy to have them cut greens for him.

"It's always interesting during an Open. You get pressure and you find things go wrong but you think about them and draw on your experience. If conditions are right I know that I've got the staff and machinery go out and present a very respectable course. I think very highly of my staff they've all been to college and all have a great deal of experience and have been with me for a great many years. In fact excluding Andrew the apprentice we average 20 year's greenkeeping each and we have a total of 165 years between us."

To emphasize the fact Jimmy asks if I would mind if he listed the names of his team rather than give an equipment inventory. "They are far more important to me than machines."



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