

Wentworth is probably the busiest club in the country, but Chris Kennedy and his team relish every action-packed day, as Scott MacCallum found out when he visited shortly before the Volvo PGA Championship. Course pictures by Brian Morgan

For many Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers the arrival of the pros for a tournament, whether it be a small pro-am or a major Tour event, is the highlight of a season, or in some cases, a career.

The pressures are greater, the demands on staff much more intense, praise is shouted louder but the criticism cuts deeper. The courses must live up to the high expectations of the professional players for the short time around the championships. Wentworth Members, however, quite rightly, expect the best all year round.

Even at the biggest golf clubs such occasions are at most annual and the preparations can be put in place months in advance.

At Wentworth Club, though, it's different. There are two major tournaments every year – the Volvo PGA Championship in May and the Toyota World Match Play Championship in October... plus innumerable smaller pro-ams, society and company days and product launches. It means that there is always something coming up to keep Chris Kennedy and his team from letting the grass grow under their feet.

"No-one else to our knowledge has got two tournaments every year", explained Chris, who works closely with the West Course's Head Greenkeeper, Graham Matheson.

The winter programme work is carried out during January and February – the only real rest time that the West is allowed.

"It's a bit of a disadvantage because most clubs can put greens away for the winter and have five or six months recovery period whereas we're talking just three months before another major tournament."

"Here we are in April and there's not a leaf on the trees and we've got five weeks to the PGA. After the tournament it takes three to four weeks to break down the tented Village which takes us to the end of June, providing a mere six to eight week fallow period before it starts to build up again for the Match Play."

The nutrition programme at the PGA has therefore to be looked at carefully. "You've got to push the green on as it is early season but you want the grass to be on the



The **BUZZ** never stops at **WENTWORTH**

wane rather than the rise and you want it not to be thinning out but healthy and vigorous and at the same time not growing too quickly when the tournament is on. We get the fertiliser programme set in April and use a lot of top dressing, a minimal amount of fertiliser and a lot of aeration which has to be done because of the length of the tournament day."

Although "peaking" twice a year, Wentworth Club has to be at its best primarily for its members, and the considerable number of pro-ams, celeb-ams, charity and company days held at all times of the year, every year. For many, playing at Wentworth is the highlight of the season. Anything less than perfect would be a great and lasting disappointment.

Chris came to Wentworth in 1989 having been Course Manager at Hagg's Castle, where he was in charge of five European Tour Championships and two

Scottish PGA Championships, but there the similarities between that job and this one end.

"Since coming down from Scotland, I've had to rethink my greenkeeping strategies and management processes. If you're dealing with what is simply a private members' club you can make decisions designed to safeguard the golf course, whereas here you've got to think about a broader customer base and manage those customer relations accordingly. You can't say 'it's wet or it's too frosty today, we'll close the golf course.' At times you've got to open the course even though it's against your better judgement. Then you've got to think quickly can we recover from the damage which has been caused. Luckily we have the resources to make the recovery happen," explained Chris.

By the end of the year Chris' team will have coped with a deafening 23 shotgun starts; admit-

tedly a heavy workload, but this is compensated for by the fact that a third of them are charity days. This is the Club's way of supporting their fund-raising efforts.

"Whoever's big day it is, it is essential that their participants and guests leave with happy memories. We tailor the day to make it special. I sit on the planning meetings for these days and feed down the line to Graham and his crew."

Meanwhile, there are two other top quality golf courses, a par 3 course, a driving range, two practice facilities, plus 14 tennis courts to maintain.

The two major events of the year provide differing problems for the greenkeeping team. One, the Volvo PGA Championship takes in the final Bank Holiday in May and has a field of 154 players while the other, the Toyota World Match Play has just 12 players playing 36 holes with

spectators following at most four matches during the first two days and just two on the other two days. One bonus is that the tented hospitality Village is in the same place but on the downside it is laid out completely differently.

"We've asked if certain aspects could be the same, but the organisers have different marketing strategies", explained Chris. "The PGA Championship is the 'Ascot Week' of golf with a village green party atmosphere while the Match Play is a more commercial week where people visit, look at the sponsor's product, have lunch, be ferried out to watch some golf, come back and have afternoon tea", said Chris, who has close relationships with the European Tour whose headquarters are at Wentworth, and IMG.

As well as the PGA Championship itself, the entire week is filled with events which require the attention of the greenkeeping team. This year that started on the Sunday, a full five days before the serious competition began



Graham Matheson, left and Chris Kennedy

with an Andersen Consulting event with all their VIPs. On the Wednesday there was a Canon Shoot out with ten of the top players playing over nine holes of the West for charity, while on Thursday there was the Corporate Cup - there is no Pro-am at the PGA Championship.

But there must have been time to relax after the Championship and Costantino Rocca had been acclaimed champion. Nope.

On Tuesday there was a Volvo

Pro-Captains' competition run by the PGA over the West course and on the Wednesday there was a Members' and Guests' Day with the course set up exactly as for the final day of the Championship.

"Whereas normal golf tournaments have a four day programme plus a pro-am, typically, we have nine or ten days of competition," said Chris, in a matter-of-fact tone.

At both the PGA and the Match

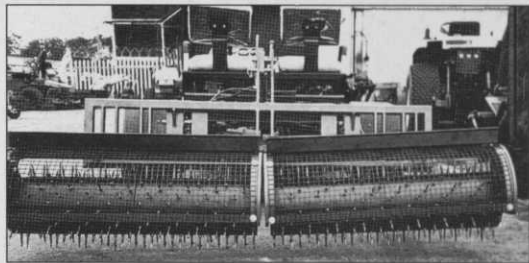
Play the greenkeeping staff start and finish work in the dark as the first tee time in the PGA is 7am and the practice ground, putting green and pitching facilities have got to be prepared and ready for use one hour before players begin.

"So we need upwards of 22 guys setting up course at 5am and the course has still got to be playing to tournament conditions at 8.15 in the evening."

There is a running crew of 24 for the PGA Championship and the preparation work cutting tees, surroundings, greens, fairways and semi rough, is all done before play every morning and then done again in the evening in case there is bad weather and it can't be done in the morning.

"People say 'why can't you get the greens lightening fast like Augusta?' Well, if you've prepared them at 5am and they are still being played at 8 in the evening, you're looking at a long growing period. The Masters has a smaller field of around 95 players.

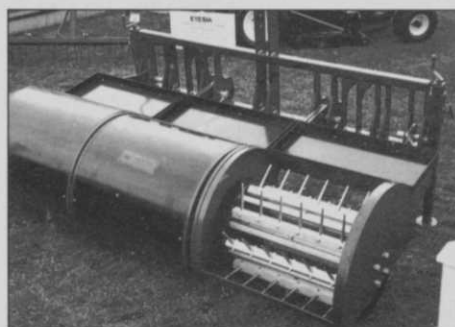
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There are similar problems in the Match Play to overcome.

"You can get frost and freezing fog. Last year the first ball struck in earnest was at 11 am and then they played two rounds".

Chris, Graham and Bernard Gallacher OBE, resident Club Professional and the successful 1995 European Ryder Cup captain, are always looking at ways of changing and improving the course.

Chris elaborated, "The new bunkers at 18 were re-designed again in the winter of 1995-96 to make them much deeper. It was done with the Tour's blessing and although we thought there would be great resentment from the players the view has been that it should have been done years ago. We are limited, because we can't add to the length of the Harry Colt design so what we can do is tighten up with new tees, bunkers and a reshaping of fairways."

One of the examples of this is the mini forest which has been planted on the right side of the 8th so anyone who blocks his shot



out will not have an easy path in to the green.

"The layout is a very good test of golf whether it's windy or not, but the players all agree it plays even tougher if the wind is blowing."

The course plays similarly for the PGA and Match Play. The world's best players participate in both championships, and they know Wentworth well. There are subtle changes in the shapes of

the fairways and pin placements because they are tougher for match play. We tend to use variations on tees more in the Match Play than we do in the PGA. Green speed, height of cut for fairways, semi rough and rough is primarily all set up the same. We aim for both tournaments to have green speeds of something like 10.5 to 11.5. Between 10 and 11 for the PGA because it's a longer tournament with more

feet going over the greens and between 10.7 and 11.5 is what we aim for at the Match Play and so far we've been quite lucky with the weather and we've been able to produce the goods. We can't stress how much the weather comes into it. We can put all the ingredients into the pot but if it goes cold on us there is not a lot we can do about it."

The Match Play offers up some

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'Some people say there shouldn't be any trees on a heathland golf course but I disagree'

difficult logistical problems to overcome.

"You can have 10-15,000 people watching just two matches and all hitting the tented village and clubhouse at the same time.

"We have a very good irrigation scheme and can now virtually control the bounce of the ball from the tee. Graham now has the facility to wet down the fairways, so provided the players hit the fairway, the ball reacts in the desired fashion. For example, making it spring forward to stop it in the landing area, particularly on a hole like the 17th with the big left to right slope. Seven years ago you couldn't have stopped a wedge on the 17th fairway."

A new irrigation system was recently completed on the Edinburgh, installation took place during the 1995-96 winter, while a new scheme is also planned for the East. The aim is that all three 18 hole courses should be brought up to the same standard as the West. Other areas of development include the re-design of

the driving range. Re landscaping will encompass total irrigation, while more bays will be added and the teaching facilities improved.

Over the years, nature has played its part in the re-design of the course.

"Some people say there shouldn't be any trees on a heathland golf course but I disagree. I think when Mother Nature does something you should try and work with her instead of having a constant tree felling programme. If you go out onto the Chobam Common end of the course - holes 8, 9 and 10 - there wasn't a single tree 40 years ago. Those that are there now weren't planted, they just appeared of their own accord. I think the course looks better for it.

Despite the vast experience of Chris and Graham like every other greenkeeper they are well aware that they never stop learning.

Chris said, "We're very lucky that we're part of a friendly industry and we can go and see

how other people tackle problems, how they present the golf course and people will pass on pieces of information. I've been going to The Open since I was 14 years of age and I've always asked questions of greenkeepers. At the open Championship every year, BIGGA greenkeepers get a chance to see the examination paper in the front line by doing bunker raking, divoting and any other task which they are asked to do. Guys who have never been involved in a golf tournament in their life are now in the front line and see exactly how things happen. Then they go away and use what they have seen at the Open championship on their own golf course. That can only be good for their members. This is an education process which happens annually and I'm very pleased to say that along with Walter Woods, I was one of the people who started that off many years ago. It's great to see it going from strength to strength on an annual basis and presentation at small 18

hole courses is now better than it's ever been because they see how it's done at golf tournaments."

"The last six years at the Club have been very interesting and with more plans on the drawing board, the future is going to be every bit as exciting."

Things just never stop at Wentworth.

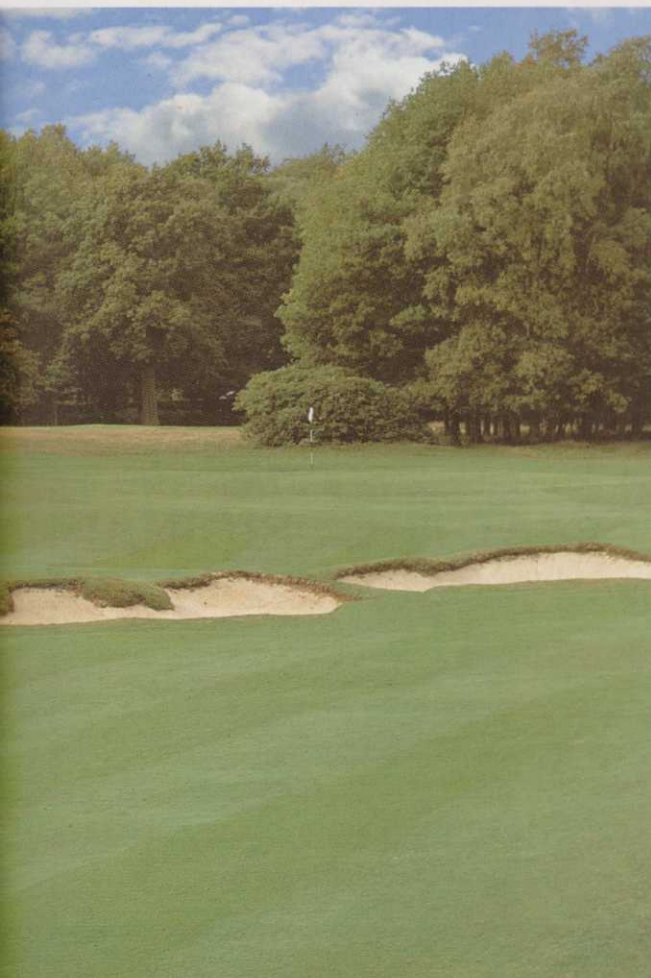
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Robert Washbrook, Porters Park GC

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