

Cecil George goes back to the beginnings of the Open Support team and recalls some of the memorable moments on its way to Royal Troon 1997.

Another Open Championship, another Support Team!

Let's go back to when it all began St Andrews Open Championship, 1984, before the amalgamation of the Associations.

The Scottish and International Golf Greenkeepers, through Walter Woods, got the chance to be involved in The Open. Bunker raking at the Open Championship had been inconsistent – it had been left to the Championship clubs to keep the bunkers in order. The R&A wanted a quality job yet at some courses “yoppers” and other odd-bods were hired to the detriment of the bunkers. Walter noticed this and saw the opportunity to rectify the matter. Before the 1984 Open he suggested that qualified greenkeepers should look after the bunkers. He could, of course, have involved his own staff but felt that his men were out early in the morning and evening doing their general work along with all the added extras The Open brings to the already overworked staff.

Walter proposed that SIGGA could be the people to carry out the duties of bunker raking throughout the tournament, free of charge. He did, however, ask that the R & A provide a tent where the greenkeepers could meet, have a place to report to, organise the bunker rakers and rest. Walter also mentioned that if anything untoward happened, such as inclement weather, vandalism or assistance required, there would be a glut of experienced greenkeepers on hand for any eventuality.

His words have come true on many occasions, none more so than when the heavens opened up in 1988 and Lytham St Annes became the second flood. Saturday's third round was postponed until Sunday and Jimmy MacDonald used the greenkeepers to sweep the water off the green for the rest of the day and most of that night.

At Royal Birkdale in 1991 my old friend, Tom O'Brien, had a green badly damaged by vandals. The greenkeepers again came to the rescue in assisting to rectify the damage and so allowing play to start as per the R & A programme.

Many interesting, or should I say “weird” happenings, have taken place year after year. When



Ian MacLeod after raking the bunker Nick Faldo managed to find on the first morning of the 1996 event

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we started the luxury of sleeping in a bed was limited to the lucky few who could cram into two six berth caravans. I wasn't one of the lucky ones who was allocated a bed, I and a few others slept on the floor. I still remember marks on my side from the time I woke with a pain in my side and on examination I had a black and blue patch which I could not explain. The next night I again felt something pressing on my sore bit. Being a little less inebriated than the night before I realised there was the connection for a gas pipe sticking into my side!

At Turnberry in 1986 we bor-

rowed a perfectly good big tent from Jimmy Kidd, of Gleneagles, which held about 30. I won't go into the erection of the tent, Head Greenkeepers know everything! What some don't know they invent and the first attempt at putting up the tent was a fiasco.

The site was nearly in George Brown's back garden and let's say it was soft stony ground! The pegs were only half in the ground and I have to say there was an excellent bar run by the Turnberry Hotel staff, for the staff and after an evening of tripping over the guy ropes and generally giving the tent abuse, it partly col-

lapsed in the night.

The next morning at 5.30am I was standing outside the tent shouting out names of greenkeepers to be on the 1st tee for 7am. I could not ask Scott MacCallum to print the utterances that came from the tent!

It was at Turnberry in '86, on a suggestion from Chris Kennedy, of Wentworth, that we started sending a bunker raker with each match. This was a great success and the format has not been changed since.

From Turnberry to Muirfield 1987 and we still worked out of the two caravans and the big tent

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was still our main dormitory. We had been asking through the old greenkeeper magazine for volunteers to rake bunkers at The Open and had had some response from both our sister Associations and we always had the few stalwarts from England who took a holiday and assisted in the bunker raking. In 1987 for the first time we saw quite an increase from south of the border and one in particular was Richard Heaslip. He came on his motorbike with his own tent. The weather was gales and lashing rain in July even to us was unexpected. Again the big tent came down and I remember Richard standing looking at his gear lying all over the place and soaking wet. Still, The Open went on and the greenkeepers did their share of clearing up.

This was one of the years when our tent in the village was back to back with the stewards tent. We formed a lasting friendship with the Stewards the first year at St Andrews and some of us still meet in the Stewards tent at the close of each day's play.

At Muirfield in '87 there was still no distribution of shirts, waterproofs or umbrellas though we did get the meal tickets which was excellent. However, the amount of food some of the lads put away we would have to give them an abundance of tickets to stove off their hunger.

The Swedish greenkeepers at this time were some of our stalwarts in particular Carl, Einar and Jan. I think Einar had a bed somewhere while Carl and Jan slept in their car. One morning at Muirfield the East mist crept in from the sea and the greenkeepers started arriving in small groups. I looked out of the caravan window and the two huge Swedes seemed to appear like the Vikings of old coming from their long boats for a bit of rape and pillage instead of a bit of rake and bevy!

The Swedes always gave me food for thought. Why do the biggest men always take the small plastic rakes?

It is pleasing to hear that the Swedish Greenkeepers Association is now involved with a support team at the Swedish Open. I am sure anyone who wants to assist need only contact Stig Pers-



Above: At least you get a good view...
Left: Blending in with the crowds



son and his or her wish will be granted.

Reverting back to St Andrews '84 and Jimmy Neilson, of Murrayfield, was the President of the SIGGA. He tells me all they had in the tent was a bar, of course, and six promotional advert stands. After the first practice day our tent was transformed, lovely tables and chairs and even a carpet. The recliners and furnishings were borrowed or something (!) from a certain hotel in St Andrews. Walter said the Manager was a sympathetic friend.

As all of you who have raked bunkers at the Open will know rotas are drawn up, and there is a list of instructions. You have to keep to the ropes, only speak when spoken to, assist the lady scorers and make yourself "inconspicuous". The last time at Royal Troon, Alex Robertson, of Grangemouth, made himself so inconspicuous that he was reported missing by one of the chappies on the intercom. Chris Kennedy went out to see where Alex had gone to find Alex sitting inside the rope with his faithful rake beside him. Chris asked where he had been, "Here" was the reply, "Just making myself

inconspicuous!" Since then we have walked with the scorer and the person carrying the scoreboard.

This turned out to be a godsend especially in wet and windy weather where we, being the improvisers and forward thinkers of the golfing fraternity have assisted boys and girls to hold the score boards up in strong winds, shelter the scorers with umbrellas from the rain while at the same time keeping a professional eye on the golfers and how many strokes each takes, in particular, when a pro is out of sight of the scorer.

Our professionalism came to the fore at Lytham last year when Duncan Smith, of our support team, was called in by the R&A to assist in a rather awkward situation. The pro, Des Smyth, had been in a bunker but had miscalculated his score for that hole. Duncan said "Yes, he had raked that bunker and yes, the pro's score was wrong". So with the greenkeeper's assistance all was put to right. This should be a lesson to all of us who are involved in the Support Team, always remember "Big Brother is Watching You!" If you are lucky enough

you might, like Jimmy Paton, be rewarded with a set of irons. Mark Calcavecchia thanked Jimmy then gave him the set of irons from his bag. I was always envious of this show of generosity, the most I ever got from a pro was a handful of banana skins from Paul Azinger at Muirfield '87 when he was leading going into the final round.

We have greenkeepers from all over the world visit our marquee. Some of them have raked bunkers last year at St Annes with two young men from Augusta out doing their bit. The Swedes are always present, Welshman John Rodgers, reported in from Thailand and there were lads from Germany, France, Spain, Canada, USA, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa and these were only the greenkeepers I remember speaking to.

Harry Diamond always has a story to hand and last time we were at Royal Troon he and I were asked to go down to Norman Ferguson's house to invite him up to the tent for the reception BIGGA was giving for the Press. We got down to Norman's to find him out in his garden lifting his early tatties. "No panic here" Harry said, "That's Norman - cool, calm and deliberate in the middle of the Open Championship."

Don't be like a young greenkeeper at Muirfield in 1987. He came into the Portakabin, threw his rake with disgust in the corner and said, "Tomorrow give me the clubs and give that sand-martin I was out with the rake and I'll return a better score than he put in today!"

See you all doon at Troon soon!