

Dream team head into first

Billy McLachlan and his team are well prepared for this month's Open Championship as Scott MacCallum discovered when he paid a visit a month before the big week.

Preparing an Open Championship venue would be a dream for many greenkeepers but with only one Open a year, and a set rota of venues, it is an ambition which remains unfulfilled for most.

Not so Billy McLachlan who, at the age of 33, is the man charged with ensuring Royal Troon is at its perfect best for the visit of the world's top golfers in the third week in July.

A local man, Billy joined the staff at Troon in 1982 working under Norman Ferguson and took over from Norman at the beginning of '94 with The Open Championship looming over the horizon.

If he is daunted by the prospect of having his work on show to thousands of spectators and billions of television viewers across the world, Billy does a good job of hiding it. Blessed with the matter-of-fact demeanour which prevents many Scots from getting above themselves, Billy is taking everything in his stride.

One of his master strokes, however, had nothing to do with the golf course but, along the lines of Kenny Dalglish, Alex Ferguson and Roy Aitken (hopefully!), has been in a great new signing.

Now I don't believe Jim Devlin cost Billy a huge transfer fee – and not because he arrived under the Bosman Ruling – but Jim has quickly proved that he's worth more than his weight in gold.

Previously the Course Supervisor at three of Troon's Municipal courses, Jim joined Royal Troon as Billy's Deputy in December of last year.

He brought with him a wealth of experience and ability which was identified when he was a finalist in the Miracle Professional Premier Greenkeeper of the Year competition in '96.

"It is fortunate that we have got together this year and have started to change a few things. It actually looks as though we have changed them for The Open but they would have been done any-



Billy McLachlan, fourth from left, Jim Devlin, second from left and the Troon team

way," explained Billy, speaking from the maintenance unit which itself shows signs of a recent significant overall and Jim's influence.

Jim reinforces the point by adding, "We are trying to get the course to a standard where it is going to be like it all the time and it just happens that it looks as though it is being done specifically for The Open."

The talents of Billy, Jim and the rest of the team combined with a new watering system should ensure a true test for the world's best golfers and provide sufficient rough to make The Open field think twice. In 1989 when Mark Calcavecchia defeated Greg Norman and Wayne Grady in the first ever four hole play-off, you may recall a lack of water kept rough down to a minimum ensuring that



Jim on the "postage stamp"

the course was less fierce than it was originally intended to be

"There were certain things we were doing which we were quite happy with and wanted to keep going and other things which Jim brought in and we thought were good ideas.

"Many of these were just small. Things going on a different times and different materials that Jim had used but I hadn't," explained Billy, for whom the '97 Open Championship will be the third on which he has worked.

The approach is obviously to the liking of the R&A which has been happy to allow Billy and his team to get on with their work.

"They visited last August and on the strength of that we have tightened four fairways and David Boocock, the R&A agronomist, visited in March and he was happy with the way things were looking.

"If they were here all the time we would be wondering if they were worried about us but they are quite happy to let us get on with it," said Billy.

"They could see that we were on the right tracks," added Jim.

Among the major tasks that the team has carried out has been the revetting of 62 of the courses 84 bunkers and the relaying of the path on the course's most famous hole – The Postage Stamp.

"We lifted all the sleepers and relaid them so that they were horizontal to the hill and not running down the hill. We're pleased with the way it looks," said Jim.

Billy visited Royal Lytham last

year during The Open to get a flavour of how the Championship went and spent time in the company of Jimmy MacDonald MBE, whose major championship experience is second to none.

"Jimmy was a great help and despite being busy took time to talk to me. I've also spoken to George Brown at Turnberry and, of course, Norman Ferguson and been given some excellent advice."

A month before the Sunday when the players start to arrive and begin practising the course looked immaculate and more than capable of hosting The Open then and there.

"The idea of the Championship is that you have the course in such a condition that all you need is a final tweak to get it to where you want it. The last thing you need to be doing is sitting three weeks before it and wondering what we need to do it get it



ready. You want it to be there early so that you can keep it bubbling over ready for that final tweak," explained Billy.

The two men obviously have a very good rapport and think along the same lines on what they want to achieve.

"We've had our greens down for a little while now so it's not a case of drastic cutting on the day. It's just that final adjustment and we are quite close now," said Jim.

"We're trying to do a week's work every day at the moment. We want to get it right and we

Open with confidence

Scenic pictures by BRIAN MORGAN



have the bodies to do it," said Billy.

"If you start worrying about it that's when things start to go wrong and you start thinking about things you haven't done rather than concentrating on things you have," said Jim.

The course was closed on June 29 and prior to that, on June 15, member's guests were also stopped.

The greenkeeping team has had to work closely with the outside contractors brought in to erect all the tents and stands which go together to create the

modern day Open venue.

"We marked out tracks for them all with a yellow line so we could keep the mess where we wanted it and to begin with everyone stuck to these but as we are getting nearer the time more people are around and just nip in here and there. A few weeks ago it didn't bother us but nearer the time there isn't enough time to repair damage," said Jim.

"When I went to Lytham last year I learned that that they stopped visitors but not member's guest and the course was as busy

as ever so we made the decision to stop member's guests," said Billy.

The 12 man Troon Greenkeeping team works very much as a unit and everyone has a say.

"We've tried to ensure that it is not a one man or a two man show here. Everyone is involved and if any of the guys comes up with an idea we'll sit and listen. None of us is so big headed or selfish to say it's our way or nothing. I'm sure Billy would have the whole team with him at the prize giving on the Sunday afternoon if he could," said Jim.

"Don't remind me," says Billy, as he contemplates the most public part of the job of an Open course's Head Greenkeeper. "I'll probably trip up walking onto the green."

It is perhaps the one thing which crystallises the scale of the event for Billy who has grown up watching, and, as "one of the boys", working at Open Championships.

"Jim and I have talked about it and it is one of those things that if you did start to think about it from early in the year you could get quite worried. But you tell yourself that you will do your best and the Championship will be here and gone. All you can do is try your best.

"If you thought too deeply into it and worried about all the

things you needed to do and the number of people out there watching you'd end up jumping off Ailsa Craig out there. You have just got to get on with it," said Billy.

"Good weather, nothing unforeseen, no problems. That'll do us. It's not a lot to ask for. Is it?"

No it isn't. But you can't help thinking if it doesn't quite happen like that Billy, Jim and the team will be able to handle themselves whatever is thrown at them.

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY

- Three Toro Greensmasters
- One Toro Fairway Mower 5300
- One Ransomes 180
- One Toro 216
- Four Ford Tractors
- 11 Hand Machines
- Cartes/Paladins
- Three Cushmans with various slitters, top dressers and sprayers
- One Iseki Mini Tractor, Coremaster Tiner
- One Vertidrain
- One Uni Drill Seeder
- One Power Riddle
- One Power Shredder
- Five Pedestrian Rotaries
- Four Flymos
- One set of Hydraulic Gangs
- Two Turf Cutters.