

Preparing for the...

Drama

Valderrama hosts this month's Ryder Cup. Scott MacCallum visited the course and spoke with the man who has created the jewel in Europe's golfing crown.

The ambition to be the best is one which drives many but few achieve. Indeed, whether the feat has even been achieved is often a very subjective matter. There are some areas, however, where the top spot can be identified. Tiger Woods, for example, is currently top golfer as assessed

statistically by the world rankings, Pete Sampras is the same in tennis. Others occur by vote by agreed experts or the general public with the Oscars, phone-ins etc.

In golf Pine Valley generally comes out on top in the "Best Course in the World" Poll but one course is the undisputed Champion in the "Best on Mainland Europe" category having won the vote in a British golf magazine for the past six years.

That course is Valderrama, in Sotogrande, Southern Spain, the course which later this

month becomes the first non British or non American venue for the Ryder Cup.

That a course so young – it is only 12 – could be chosen, from all the wonderful courses Great Britain and Europe has to offer, for the the year's top sporting event in the world would perhaps be a surprise if nothing of the background of Valderrama and its illustrious owner were known.

Jaime Ortiz-Patino is by any yardstick a remarkable man. He was President of the World Bridge Federation for ten years

before deciding in the mid '80s to devote his time to golf. Since then he has become one of the most influential figures in the game.

The venue for the Ryder Cup match began its life as Sotogrande New, and was originally designed in 1975 by Robert Trent Jones Sr, regarded by many as the greatest living golf course architect.

He was given the rare opportunity of redesigning and refining the layout freed of the budgetary handcuffs that had shackled him first time round.



...at Valderrama

This he did with "Jimmy", as he is universally known at his side to ensure that, while the course was just as the revered architect wanted, it also passed the test laid down by the man who paid for the changes. It was in 1985 that the course took on the name for which it has become famous.

With Augusta National as Mr Patino's model the attention to detail shown by he and Trent Jones Snr was incredible.

"I brought in 4000 pine trees because I don't like seeing houses when I play golf. I want

to see green that's why I love playing Pine Valley and The Berkshire," he explained, adding that he is a member of 18 golf clubs.

"I also put in 400 cork trees which are very difficult to transplant and 600 olive trees.

"Everyone laughed when I brought these big stumps and planted them and I was told that I'd lose 20% the first year and 15% the second. I made sure they got no water and lost five trees the first year and ten the second.

"I have the course now just

how I want it. I have more work to do in maintenance but the golf course is perfect," he says with all the satisfaction of a contented man.

Now you would assume he would seek out, head hunt and lure to Valderrama one of the world's top Course Managers. But not Jimmy Patino. He developed his own knowledge of the complex areas of agronomy and general course maintenance, picking some of the finest brains in the world, and is proud to be Valderrama's Head Greenkeeper, Course

Manager, Course Superintendent - however you want to describe him.

Having hosted the season closing Volvo Masters since 1987 the Ryder Cup fell into the Patino sights and it was little surprise, when it was decided that Spain would have the event, that he would prevail.

Since the confirmation came through Valderrama has been preparing itself for the three days when the course will be the centre of every golfer's attention. And nothing has been left to chance.

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"From September 1 we are down loading the entire irrigation system and there will be no more automatic irrigation while we will not irrigate anywhere outside the ropes," explained Mr Patino from his vast office overlooking his pride and joy.

"We will only irrigate from the satellites stations during day time so we will know what is going on and no accidents can happen. If a sprinkler head (there are 3,700 on the course) gets clogged we will see it."

All the sand is removed from the bunkers every four years and replaced – they use crushed granite taken from up in the mountains – and the overseeding is also done every four years but both practices were brought forward this year to coincide with the Cup match.

In the main, however, the maintenance programme has remained at the same intense level which has seen the course in such peak condition for the Volvo Masters.

"We close the course down for four weeks every year around the middle of May. We don't close earlier because the poa is still seeding and we don't want to aerify the greens when it is still in the air."

The maintenance programme starts with the closing of one nine when all the fairways are heavily sliced, aerified and verticut. The verti drain is used in the rough and the Bermuda rough is cut down, top dressed and fertilised.

"I believe I was the first to top dress fairways and now three or four clubs in the States also do it."

Once the top dressing has been brushed in the first nine is reopened and the first phase of the procedure has been completed. The second nine is then closed for a fortnight to allow for the same work as the first nine to be completed as well as all the greens and areas around the greens done as well. Once this has been completed they return to the first nine and do the greens and surrounds.

The programme is worked out by Mr Patino and Bill Bangerfield, formerly the Director of the USGA Greens Section, who spends time at Valderrama every year supervising the work.

"Bill and I set up the maintenance programmes for six months at a time and this includes everything that needs to be done on a weekly basis. For example, now until the Ryder Cup we will hand brush greens with brooms every afternoon against the grain," he explained as we talked in early June.

Valderrama has Penncross greens but Mr Patino is not convinced that it is the right grass for the Spanish climate.

"Despite my love of Robert Trent Jones I don't think he did the right thing in bringing Penncross down to the Costa del Sol. It is too delicate, it needs a lot of care, a lot of chemicals and a lot of water. I have got the resources, the manpower to keep it – we have two girls who hand weed the greens five days a week to get the poa out, so they are poa free – but it is very costly and other courses can't do it. Furthermore we have very little play – 1200 rounds a year."

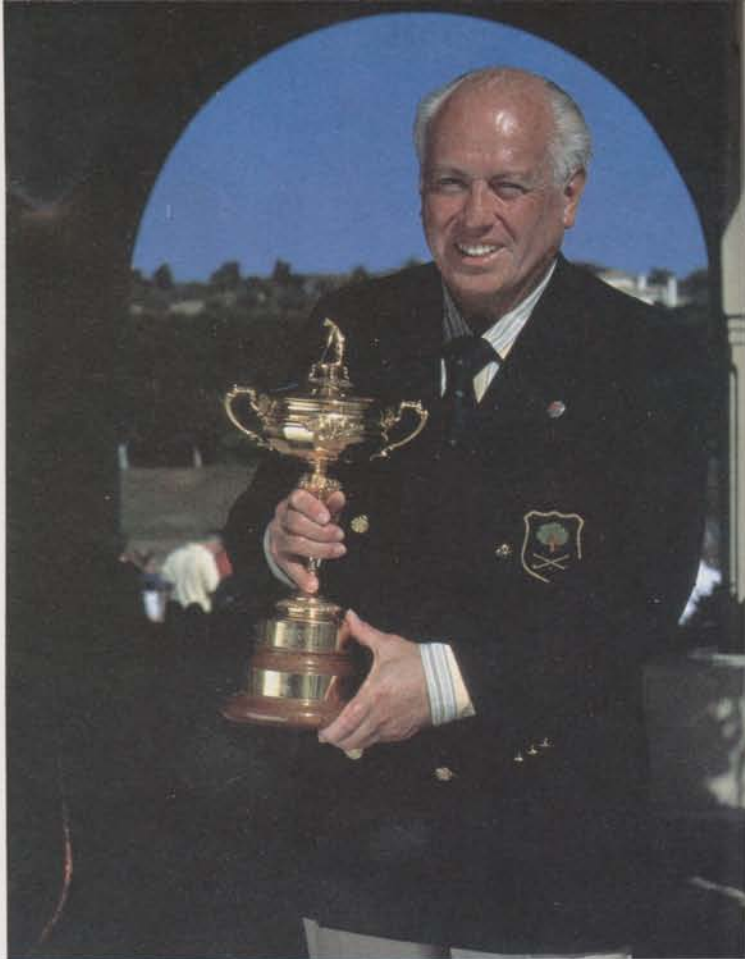
He is also adamant about what the green should be – Bermuda, which doesn't need much water and is much stronger than Penncross.

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"Every time a new golf course is built in the area I tell them to put in Bermuda but they ask what I've got. When I tell them I know the comments that come back Jimmy wants us to put Bermuda in because he's the only one who wants to have good greens'. It's a no-win situation!"

To say that Valderrama "has got the resources" is akin to saying that Bill Gates has a little bit tucked away for his retirement.

The greens staff numbers 70, broken down into two crews of



Jaime Ortiz-Patino with the Ryder Cup

Picture: PHIL SHELDON

35, which are then broken into crews which cut greens, crews which do bunkers, another which do tees etc.

"They work for seven days non-stop – a 56 hour week – and then have seven days off. You may feel that is very expensive but it isn't really when you think about it because they work on Saturdays and Sundays, when you would normally have to pay double and they also work on holidays including Christmas and New Year's Day if they happen to fall on a working week.

"So for 26 weeks one crew is working and the other crew works for the other 26 weeks.

"Then when I have maintenance or tournaments I give them extra pay and they all work. I have had a lot of problems with the unions but I told them that the workers like it and if they were to take a vote they'd all stand against the unions," he explained.

There are also three mechanics, a painter and a brick layer.

"Supervisors work a system whereby they work five days and then take four days off so a supervisor works with all the crews as they overlap. Then every tenth day both supervisors are there and they can compare notes."

Mr Patino also leads from the front when it comes to training his men in the use of equipment.

"I try all the machines when they first come out and then, as the manuals are in English and

not Spanish, I explain to the men how to use them.

"I like Toro equipment. I started with it but I deal directly with the Head Office in Minneapolis. The local Toro dealership is in Marbella which is fairly local but I find I've got more spare parts than he does."

"We do everything we can with walk behind machines – aprons, collars, tees. Then everything on the fairway is the lightest equipment you can have – we use a triplex which most people use on the greens. I know Toro has some very good fairway mowers and gangs which are very light but I said 'Leave me alone, I will cut them with your greens mowers. We always pick up our clippings on the fairways."

He has also found a unique way on curing the Spanish habit of being hard on equipment.

"They do not know about preventative maintenance. They fix it when it is broken. Red lights go on or flash and they don't stop.

"I saw someone driving a big 4500 five gang recently and could see a light flashing. I pointed it out and he said 'It's alright it's been flashing all day. There must just be something wrong.' I sent him straight back to the maintenance centre.

"Mowers never used to last here. A walk behind would be broken after a year when it should last ten.

"So I said 'OK. I'll give you each a mower.' There are eight people

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who cut greens so eight mowers. Eight with other regular jobs so eight other pieces of equipment.

"People said it was ridiculous because the mower would only be working one week in two but the mowers have now lasted eight or nine years and are as good as new. They look after them, wash them and generally take an interest in their equipment. It is an interesting concept."

Walking around the course during the maintenance period, despite the fact that work was going on and the sand had been removed from the bunkers it was still possible to imagine the Ryder Cup matches and what would be facing the likes of Colin Montgomerie, Nick Faldo, Tiger Woods and Tom Lehman some three and a half months later... until we reached the 16th.

Arriving at the end of the fairway we were met by the sight of the green staked out and in the very early stages of being completely relaid.

"We are rebuilding all the greens to USGA spec," explained Mr Patino without a hint of concern that had it been The Open and the UK that the same proce-

dure was being undertaken time would have been very much at a premium and the press would have been having a field day.

Because of the climate and the labour intensive practices the green would be back in play in a couple of weeks.

"We do the work in-house so the people who are putting them in are the same people who are going to be looking after them.

"I follow all the pros recommendations because on the whole they've been very constructive... Nearly all," he laughs as the corrects himself. "I didn't take out the rough at the 17th," referring to the par-5 re-designed by Seve which although controversial is bound to be the scene of some significant action during the match.

"I'm talking about people like Montgomerie, Langer, Faldo, Olazabal, Johansson and Forsbrand - our own professional. They are good boys and have given us some good tips.

"That's one of the reasons they like coming here because they know that every year they will find something better."

Valderrama is also going to host

the first green Ryder Cup. The club is the first European course to join the USGA-Audobon Cooperative Sanctuary Programme for golf course and Mr Patino works closely with the European Golf Ecology Unit headed by David Stubbs - who captained the European Bird Watching Ryder Cup team which, with Valderrama as a key player, defeated the American team.

Valderrama has set aside ten sanctuaries the wild area between out-of-bounds which provide an ideal habitat for wild flowers. During one of the course surveys 78 species of birds, 11 mammals, four reptiles, three amphibians, 20 butterflies and three dragonflies were logged. Anyone attending the Ryder Cup will also see the wonderful display boards describing what Valderrama has to offer sited around the course.

Aware of the need to improve greenkeeping knowledge in Spain he has introduced a scholarship to Michigan State University where he sends an English speaking Spanish graduate on a two year course. They work here for six months in the winter to be sure he really wants to be a greenkeeper then when he comes back I find him a golf course.

Although closely allied to the American system he has seen improvements in European greenkeeping in the last 12 years and he has some interesting observations of the differences on either side of the Atlantic.

"It is a very respected profession in America but in Britain the greenkeeper is often not allowed

in the clubhouse. This is beyond my comprehension. It is a highly professional and respectable career and it should be treated as such.

"If that doesn't happen you won't be able to attract the best people but I do think improvements are beginning to be seen.

"The more it improves the more the quality of people wanting to do the job with improve. It is the best thing that can happen to the game. I think BIGGA is very important in the role it is fulfilling."

Hosting the Ryder Cup is a dream Mr Patino has fostered for some time.

"In 1989 I started to think that it could become a reality and I think it will be a great thing for Spain. This part of Spain could be the Florida of Europe and if the Spanish do things well it is a great opportunity to promote themselves."

When it is all over, and bearing in mind the Volvo Masters has moved to pastures new, what will he do then.

"For nine years I've been privileged to have the best players in Europe for the final event of the European Tour ever year. In the 10th year I now have the best players in Europe and the best players in America. The only thing left is to get the best players in Europe and the best players in the rest of the world for a tournament. That is what I'm working towards."

And you know. I think he'll just do it.



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