

**Ken Siems invited Scott MacCallum to visit the stunning Loch Lomond Golf Club and took the opportunity to explain some of the hurdles which he and his staff have to overcome to keep it looking its best**

# Myth and magic



Above: A picturesque bridge spans a brook at the 17th

Nothing is ever quite as straight forward as it would seem. But then why should it be? It would only make for a boring life and very few of us would want that. Certainly not Ken Siems, Course Superintendent at Loch Lomond Golf Club, and a man who knows better than most that things aren't ever straight forward.

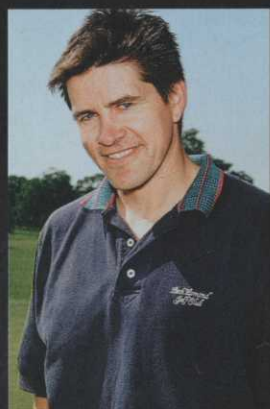
Take his golf course as an example. Loch Lomond would be a strong favourite for any golf course beauty pageant it ever entered. It is absolutely gorgeous, but it's located in one of the wettest, dullest parts in all of Britain.

And there's more...



# Myth and magic

Right: A spectacular  
aerial view showing the  
clubhouse and the Loch



Above: Ken Siems

Below: Beauty  
wherever you look

If you visit the course you'd be hard pressed to find a blade of grass out of place and greens so smooth you could play snooker on them, but look beneath the surface and you'd find conditions which would have the groundsman at a municipal putting green wondering how he'd ever produce anything playable.

As I said, nothing is ever as straightforward as it might seem.

"This site is unique in many many ways," explained Ken, in his distinctive Canadian accent, as we sat in the Loch Lomond Mess Room.

"It's probably one of the wettest areas in the UK for a golf course. Last year we had close to 93 inches of rain, and that was continuous throughout the entire year."

Think about that for a second. That's nearly eight feet! They could just about employ the services of Jacques Cousteau as a greenkeeper.

Ken continued.

"Sunlight is another thing. This is one of the most overcast, cloudy areas in the UK. There is a submarine base over in Helensburgh and one of the reasons it's there is that

the cloud cover prevents the spy satellites from seeing them. You can count the number of sunshine days we had last year on both hands and sunshine is one of the most critical elements in growing turf grass."

While you are making a mental note not to bother packing the Factor 15 next time you head to the west of Scotland let Ken give you some more information about the conditions in which he and his nine full time greenkeepers, two mechanics, a conservationist, arborist and administrator work.

"There is a lack of wind because of the shelter from the mountain, while the highest soil temperature we got last year was 58 Fahrenheit and that was in August. This is also a tree site so air circulation is poor."

But to produce such fine results in such unfavourable conditions everything else must be spot on. Mustn't it?

Well not exactly.

"One of the most important factors we have to deal with is the poor soil and the inconsistent construction."

What. Loch Lomond? The course which has been voted the finest new course in the country? Tom Weiskopf's masterpiece?

"All I do is look at the lab tests results which I have - I don't like guessing on this. Just to give you a rough example the percolation rate on the greens average out at 1.5 to 2.5 millimetres per hour. A USGA green should average at 250-300 millimetres per hour. That gives you a rough idea."

To give themselves as much chance as possible of mastering such a difficult set of circumstances Ken and the team conducted a greens' audit to provide as much information as possible to help them.

"We got the hole changer and took cores all the way down into the gravel on about seven or eight areas of a



green and measured how fast the water would move through it.

"In some cases we couldn't find any gravel, but in others it would take 30 minutes for the water to percolate through. In some cases it went straight through," explained Ken.

Then, as if to reinforce the point that he'd made so eloquently over the previous few minutes of the conversation, he added.

"If there is a site where you'd want fast draining greens, it would be this site."

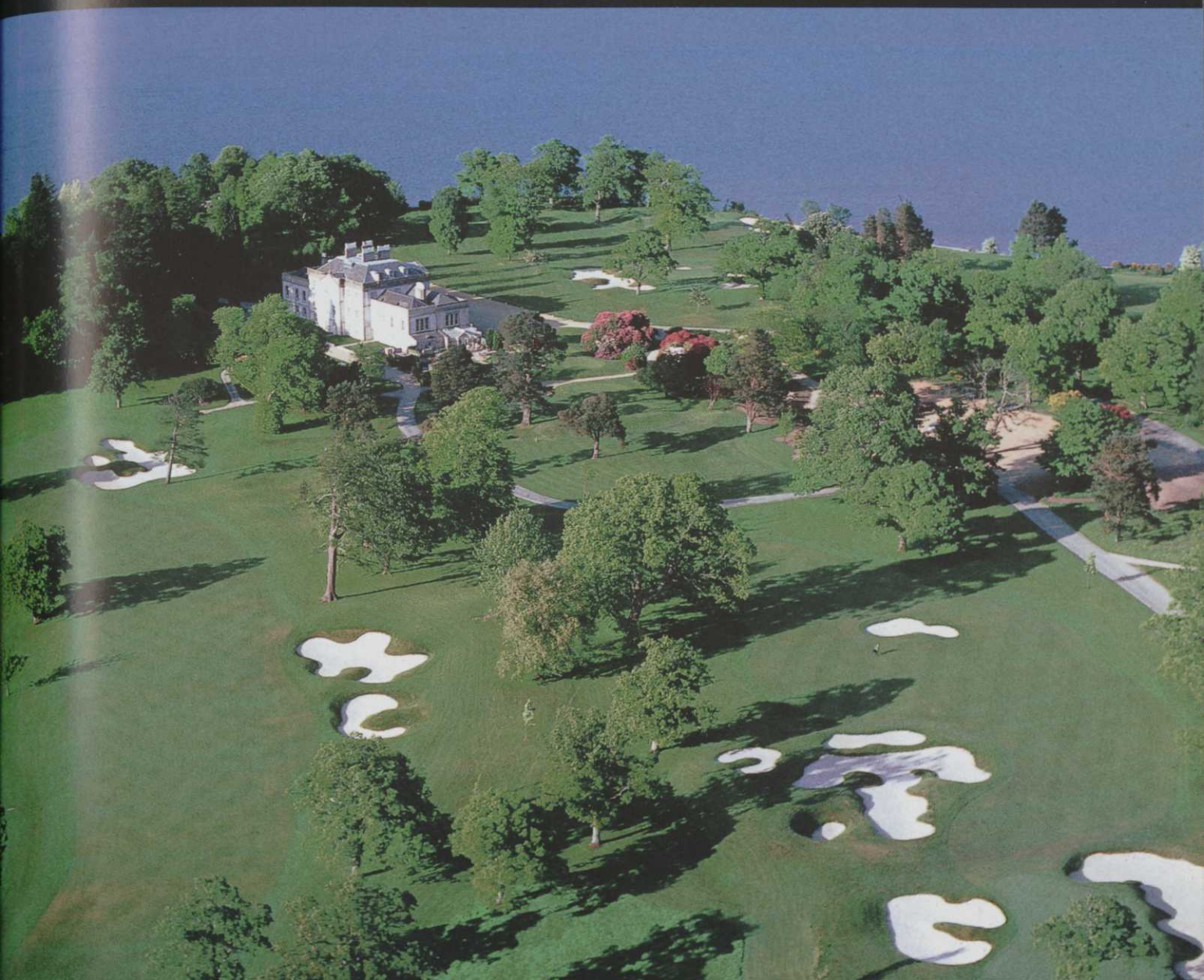
Like so many courses built around the same time the baton of ownership has passed through more than one pair of hands. In this case the Bank of Scotland ran one of the legs before passing on to Ken's employer, The Lyle Anderson Company, whose other golf developments include the prestigious Desert Mountain in the States.

"For one reason or another what the new owners have are greens that don't drain."

In an ideal world the greens would be relaid but while that is the preferred option it is not one that be put







into practice in the short term. Not with an overseas membership which pay large sums of money to be able to play the course when they want and an annual European Tour event which holds the sought after slot of the week before The Open.

Instead, remedial measures are undertaken to make the very best of a poor job.

"We drill down to the gravel, create channels and backfill with dry sand and we vertidrain them. In the summer we top dress lightly every second week and in the winter we do it as frequently as we can without damaging the turf. We also work under a dome which helps to put some heat into the greens. It has been marginally effective."

A great deal is made of the fact that the course is closed for much of the year - from November 1 to March 31 - but as Ken says it's not the ideal time of year to do much of the work they'd really like to do.

"Every golf course in the area is closed for much of the time during the winter and most of our members wouldn't come to play even if we

were open in the months that we do close.

"We keep a record of how many potential golf days we would have in the time we are closed - occasions when we consider people would actually go out and play golf - and it would not be economically viable for us to open."

The "closed" period allows the staff to carry out the jobs that would ordinarily affect play.

We aerify fairways, spread sand on the course - we had a heavy top dressing programme either by machine or if it's too wet by hand - and we continually work on drainage. We have a drainage technician who does nothing but inspect pipes and desilt them because that's critical. We will always be putting in new drainage here."

While Loch Lomond may have inspired some of Scotland's finest song writers to some of their greatest heights Ken says that one of his biggest jobs is to keep people stimulated.

"It's not a fun place to work when it's raining all the time and I have to

work very hard to keep their interest up.

"We can rake leaves here by hand for three to four months a year when it's wet. That isn't normal for most golf courses but here, with the number of trees, the wet conditions and the expectations of the membership there is no other way to do it. It's different here and a lot of other clubs don't realise that."

But surely Ken and his team have survived one of the wettest years on record with their high standards intact.

"We maintained standards but maybe not as consistently high as our owners would have liked," he confessed.

"The owners want their greens to be at nine and a half feet daily with upright growth, but to get that you need a good draining surface and if you don't it's very difficult to achieve."

Ken believes that conditions he and his team face on the day-to-day basis have turned him into a better greenkeeper.

"We are always working with the

weather and we generally prepare two to three work schedules depending upon whether we've had a tonne of rain overnight and can't cut greens first thing in the morning, or if there is a high pressure system coming in. You have to take each day as it comes. I can't go to the membership as happens in some parts of the world and say 'On September 15 we're going to aerify the fairways.'"

One rumour that Ken would like to blow out of the water is that he operates with an open cheque book.

"At the end of the day we're a business and the owners are in the business to make money. So everything we do has to be accounted for and justified. I try to work as though it's my money we're spending and I have a pretty good picture of where we stand financially. As the club grows and becomes more profitable we'll be able to grow as well."

Given one of those mythical cheque books Ken knows what he would do with it.

"I could use double the staff here, do more jobs by hand and have a team out there throwing sand on the



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Right: A magnificent Rhododendron display at the 9th

course. I'd have our car park and all the roads tarmaced and none of the equipment would sit outside," he said, wistfully.

However, things have moved on from when he arrived in July '94 when there wasn't even a maintenance facility.

Ken had been in Britain working at East Sussex National for four years before going back to Canada to work for the same developer.

"Then this opportunity came up and I weighed up the risks and went for it. It was the challenge that attracted me to Loch Lomond."

It's a challenge he feels they're overcoming.

"We're making improvements and if the owners didn't feel that they

wouldn't hesitate in getting someone else. My boss is an Augusta National member and extremely knowledgeable about golf and has a good comprehension of what's involved in golf maintenance."

The project that is taking up much of his time at the moment is converting the rough grasses to Rye which he feels will provide a better protection from the Poa Annua and recover more quickly when the galleries leave after the tournament. The greens are Penncross and the fairways are predominately Highland Bent.

"People talk about Creeping Bent going dormant but I've never seen it go dormant yet. In fact it performs wonderfully.

"I believe, as a manager, that the grass is just one little tool. When you build a course you've got to seed it with something and you've got many things to consider.

When have they got to be ready? What are members' expectations? What speed to I have to keep them at? How many rounds of golf are they going to get?" he said adding that at Loch Lomond they had 15,000 rounds, not forgetting the additional 7,500 caddie rounds a year.

"We also have small greens and have been lucky we haven't had a disease outbreak in over two years," he said adding, "and we don't preventive spray and we don't hand pick poa."

Another rumour quashed. "We could produce great poa annua here but you'd get seed heads and things like that and the owner said 'Let's see what we can do not to have it.' That's our philosophy."

Always willing to experiment and change Ken has set out a trial site alongside the Maintenance Facility in conjunction with the STRI to test grasses and is keen for other greenkeepers to become involved in monitoring their progress.

"I'm intense in what I do here. I communicate with people who I feel are going to be helpful. I like to learn and I like the guys to learn because if they're learning I know they're still interested."

At Loch Lomond you know they'll learn a lot. After all it's not as straight forward as it might at first seem.

Below: Bunkers get the creative treatment on the 15th

