

Scott MacCallum catches up with a Course Manager and Greenkeeping team who could all do with a long lie down in a darkened room after a year and a bit under the spotlight...

Bearing a Hallmark



The signature 9th hole on the Hunting Course

When England football Captain, Alan Shearer, arrived to replace Slaley Hall's Course Manager, Steve Cram, on the back nine of the exhibition match to announce the official opening of the new Priestman Course it must have come as something of a relief.

After all, such has been the hectic nature of life at Slaley Hall over the

last 14 months, the prospect of a rest instead of having to play the last nine holes would have been quite appealing.

Steve had played the opening nine in the company of former European Number One and Ryder Cup player, Ronan Rafferty, rising European Tour star, David Howell, and Slaley's Golf Operations Manager, Mark Stencer,

also a professional, in front of a gallery of press and photographers.

"It was quite an honour for me to be involved and I certainly didn't expect it," explained Steve, the day after the event.

"I'd grown in the course for the last two years and really thought that my role in the opening was over, so it was a thrill to be called up to play," said



Above: Steve Cram

Below: Steve in conversation with Simon Peters of MJ Abbott on the new third green



the 29 year-old five handicapper. "Once we finished the front nine I dropped out and Alan Shearer took over after we'd had a little barbecue on the 10th tee. Not a bad stand in!" said Steve of one of Slaley's newer members.

If Steve's moment in the limelight was a reward for the work he and his team have put in over the last 18 months it could not have been more deserved because Slaley's greenkeeping staff have been through the mill since June of last year.

Remember June of last year? Steve can't get it out of his mind.

That was the occasion when Slaley Hall entered the history books as the

venue for the '98 Compaq European Grand Prix, the first European Tour event ever not to reach a conclusion and produce a Champion.

"It was the worst time of my working career," recalled Steve ruefully.

"We had eight inches of rain in 10 days. I don't think any course in the country could have taken the amount of rain we had."

It had started two weeks before the event and never really stopped.

"We had asked Tour agronomist Richard Stillwell if an event had ever been cancelled before because we knew how bad it was. We were trying to cut fairways but mud was flying up.

"We then got a couple of drier days and Richard said we'd be laughing about it in a few years time when we'd enjoyed a successful event. After that it started again and never really stopped."

The only golf that was played was the pro-am on the Wednesday, nine holes of Thursday's first round, a full 18 on the Friday thanks to moving tees forward and turning par-5s into par-4s and par-4s into par-3s and that was that - it fell short of the 36 holes needed to complete an event.

"On Saturday it just poured and come Sunday there was no chance. I remember being in the sheds at 4am on Sunday knowing there was no chance of play."

The decision was finally taken by Tournament Director, Mike Stewart, a few hours later after the players had started to gather wanting either to play or go home.

"It is difficult to describe our feelings. We've got a great set of lads and



they're always really boisterous but they were so down. Guys were sitting looking at a paper but not really reading it, staring at the TV but not really watching it.

"The course didn't open for another week but morale was still suffering for about a month after the event. You'd try and put it out of your mind and then you'd meet someone you'd not seen since before it happened and they'd mention it," explained Steve, again reliving the nightmare for the benefit of Greenkeeper International readers.

"Even yesterday, with the opening of the second course, they showed pictures of the washout on TV."

Having endured such a horrific experience, through no fault of their own, it would have been fair to expect that this year's event, two weeks later in the calendar, would have gone without a hitch.

Reading about the fairy tale victory of newcomer David Park, in newspapers devoid of any greenkeeping related stories, might have led one to suggest that hitchless it



had been. However, the lack of such stories merely highlighted the success Steve and the team had in recovering from another potential disaster not the fact that one didn't exist.

"After last year the guys were right up for it and wanted to make it a success but all winter we'd been struggling with our 7th green and in the run-up to the Compaq it began to give us real concern," said Steve, of a green which was in shade, drained badly and offered up few pin positions on its three tiers.

"Richard Stillwell visited 12 weeks before the event and said that it was so bad we'd have to relay it."

It presented Steve with the problem of finding turf which was cut to green height.

In the end they had to buy turf which was about 20 mil in height.

"We relaid it, taking away one of the tiers, always knowing that it was going to be a temporary job."

Unfortunately it didn't take and it started thinning out before, overnight, bare patches started to appear.

"I was on the phone to Richard ever, day but the more we did to improve the situation the worse it got. Everything I tried that I had been taught greenkeeping wise, would have the opposite effect.

"Every other green on the course was the best it had ever been except this one and the first thing I'd do when I came into work every morning was go and look at it."

Two weeks before the event Martin O'Rawe, one of the Tours greenkeepers, arrived and after looking at it was quite confident that it could be turned around.

"We were trying to bring it on with liquid feed because we thought we'd get a quick response but the Tour suggested ammonium sulphate. They were confident that the next day we'd get a response, but there was nothing."

Richard Stillwell arrived at Slaley a week before the event was due to start and announced the need for some drastic action.

"He said we were going to have to relay it with a green from the second

course which had only just been opened to the public to play. We suggested using the chipping green which was the same fescue bent construction as the new course greens but Richard said the problem with that would be that the players would immediately think there was a big problem because they wouldn't have anywhere to practice and it would set their alarm bells ringing."

After measuring up the respective greens it was found that the 1st on the Priestman course was the closest in size to the Hunting Course's 7th and they set to work.

"We did the whole job in 10 hours... There were the three guys from the Tour, Roger and Richard Stillwell, Martin and all 18 of us (12 full-time and six casual staff). As we were taking the old turf away guys were lifting turf off the 1st and transporting it across in Gators where it was being relaid on boards - watered and whacked, watered and whacked before being lightly toppedressed."

The new green took up most of their attention during the days before

play started and eventually it was cut to five millimetres for the tournament.

"We could see some of the lines so we went back the next day and lifted some areas and joined them a bit better then added a bit of green dye. The old greens are 95% poa while the new one was about 80% bent so it looked different but it putted well if a little slower than the other 17.

"I think it was stimping about eight while the others were about 10. We relaid it across the line of play on a diagonal so that as you walked towards it you wouldn't see the joins and the cameras couldn't pick up them up.

"The idea came from Richard again because he said that half the problem with the players is that they see something that looks awful before they even get to it so it's going to be a big problem. If they get up and it looks reasonable they'll think it's not too bad," said Steve, adding that he checked the scores and there didn't appear to have been too many three putts on the green.

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Machinery Inventory

- Two John Deere 3235 lightweight fairway mowers
- Two John Deere 3235 semi rough mowers
- One John Deere F11145 rotary rough cutter
- One John Deere 755 rotary rough mower
- Four John Deere 2653 tees/approach mowers
- One John Deere 2500 greens mower
- Three John Deere 2243 greens mowers (one with vibratory rollers)
- Six John Deere 220 pedestrian mowers
- One John Deere 1200 bunker rake
- Four John Deere diesel gators
- One John Deere aercore RE1500
- One Kawasaki mule
- One Cushman turf truckster with Twose sprayer, Vicon spreader, top dresser
- One Izeki 530 tractor
- One Iseki 537 tractor
- One tractor mounted Hardi sprayer
- One Turfmech multi-trailer
- One Marshall trailer
- Six Flymos
- Six strimmers



Above: A view across the new Priestman Course

"The good news is that we hardly heard any complaints about it, certainly nothing directly critical."

As soon as the tournament finished the turf was removed from the chipping green and replaced on the 1st green and the chipping green was resown.

Below: The 7th green which caused all the problems



Since then M.J. Abbotts have arrived to carry out extensive drainage work and the opportunity has been taken to look at the two problem greens, the aforementioned 7th and the 3rd which is very small.

"Dave Thomas, who designed the course originally, has come up and re-done the two greens and we've started with the 3rd and will move on to the 7th in a couple of weeks," explained Steve.

Looking back at the problems on the 7th Steve believes it was a combination of cold weather and poor construction which conspired to cause the problems. Indeed Slaley is 1000 feet above sea level and north facing and the temperature is two degrees lower than Hexham which is only a few miles away.

"It was very cold and we had little sunlight and when we relaid the green we didn't go right down into the depth of the green construction. We've dug the green up since and where the gravel bed was supposed to be was all choked up with silt and rubbish and not allowing water through."

De Vere Hotels has already invested quite a bit of money in its north east jewel, with £200,000 spent on the new course and around £300,000 worth of John Deere kit. Another quarter of a million is being spent on the drainage work and redoing the two greens.

As part of the Group, Steve finds himself having regular monthly meetings with the other De Vere Course Managers.

"We're currently trying to grade all courses into about four levels so we can look at staffing and budgeting levels. The Belfry, because of the Ryder Cup, is top, and we're on a similar level, but courses which can host or have hosted ladies or senior events or regional events are also given a level."

It's an exciting time for the man who has been at Slaley all his working life but he will have every right to expect the next 14 months to be slightly less daunting than the last...unless of course, in the spirit of reciprocation, he's called upon to replace Alan Shearer at half time in a World Cup match at Wembley.