



Above: Paul Smith prepares to welcome Tiger and his colleagues
Left: The familiar Royal Lytham Clubhouse taken by Philip Medcalf
Right: A commemorative plaque in honour Bobby Jones

Royal Lytham and St Annes has a Championship history which is second to none, but for this year the course will have been prepared by a man in charge for his first major Championship ...

A NEW MAN AT THE

HELM

Royal Lytham and St Annes Golf Club is a Rolls Royce among Championship venues. There is barely a significant event in golf which hasn't visited the north west coast course and it can always be guaranteed to produce a worthy winner ... Tony Jacklin, Gary Player and Seve Ballesteros spring readily to mind.

So when the Open Championship returns later this month we can expect more of the same. Nothing much changes at Royal Lytham, certainly not for the worse.

There is one difference this year, however. A significant one, but one which to many may only become apparent when they see a young man standing a few yards from the soon-to-be-crowned Open Champion at the presentation table on the 18th green around 6pm on Open Sunday...no play-off permitting.

For the Open Champion it will be a thrilling moment, the culmination of a lifetime's endeavour ... or perhaps even the sixth consecutive Major Championship and the third leg of the mythical Grand Slam, while for new Head Greenkeeper, Paul Smith, it will signal the end of months of preparation and hard work and confirmation that he is the worthy successor to one of greenkeeping's own legendary figures.

Paul's predecessor Jimmy MacDonald MBE, had been there and done that in greenkeeping over the 26 years he was Head Greenkeeper. Not only had he prepared Lytham for some of its biggest Championships - four Opens, a Ryder Cup, a Curtis Cup, four British Senior Opens, a Women's

British Open and both British Amateur ladies' and men's Championships - but he had presided over a finishing school whose Old Boys are now Head Greenkeepers at some of the biggest and best clubs in the area.

Paul was one of these, being Jimmy's First Assistant when the Open was last played at Lytham in '96, before he left to add management to his greenkeeping credentials with a spell as Course Manager at Furness Golf Club.

Incidentally, many of those Old Boys return during Open week to add their considerable expertise and experience to Lytham's own team.

"They will be rolling, cutting and cutting and I'm certainly looking forward to having them with me for the week," said Paul.

So what thoughts will be going through his head when he walks out onto the 18th green with the new Open Champion?

"Ideally I'd like all my staff to be with me but I know that's not possible. I know I shall be very proud of my own achievements and very proud of the staff's achievements," mused Paul, as we talked in his office, some six weeks before Open week.

"It will be a tremendous highlight



Above: Paul (centre) with the rest of the Royal Lytham greenkeeping team

and I'm sure I'll feel quite emotional when it happens. I'll definitely have to pinch myself.

"I always set myself high, but achievable, targets so I always thought that one day I might be in the position."

The pride will also, no doubt, be tinged with relief after preparations for the Championship were complicated by a couple of nerve testing episodes of near Biblical proportions - flooding which would have had Noah's ancestors dusting off their work tools and the Foot and Mouth Epidemic, which would have had Paul seriously questioning what he'd done to deserve such a headache, but which ultimately remained a safe distance away.

The flooding caused the course to be closed for a total of 40 days because of it - in addition to the 16 days for

which it was closed because of frost and snow.

"The Fylde plane is relatively flat anyway and typically the water table comes close to the surface but this winter it was quite literally at the surface. We were continually pumping water, in vain really, but we felt we had to make the effort," explained Paul, who added that he was also aware of the need for a "tread softly" approach to using machinery on the course when it was closed.

"To have the course closed for such a long time is unheard of and this was just my second winter here," he added ruefully.

The complications this introduced to The Open planning meant Paul had to be adaptable, a skill he honed while at Furness when he had to learn how



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Above: Spectators won't miss a putt, thanks to the high vantage point the seating affords

Below: Lowering in the specialised seating units is a precise business

Right: A green surrounded by some of Royal Lytham's formidable bunkers



best to maximise his resources, both human and financial.

"I had laid down schedules but those went out the window and it was a case of prioritising what I thought were the essential jobs to do and undertake them when possible as well as targeting the drier areas of the course."

Surprisingly, considering the amount of standing water on the course, there were no lasting problems, at least not on the main playing areas.

"There are some areas which we had to turf late on in the spring which haven't quite recovered but these haven't been in play."

The golf course will not be presented markedly differently from the '96 Open.

"I don't have any particular style ideas for presentation and conditioning other than those based on sound links philosophy. I'd like to think that

the general condition of the golf course will be the mark that I leave on the 2001 Open - although that's not to say there won't be room for improvement.

"I'm my own worst critic and there are a million and one things that I see every day that I'd like to act upon but it's a job of prioritising. There are only so many hours in the day."

Indeed the golf course itself will also not be significantly different from the one which faced Tom Lehman five years ago although remarkably the course which boasts the most bunkers on the Open Championship rota has added to its armoury.

"We now have 197 bunkers and in my time here we have added one to the left hand side of the 15th. Stan Eby of European Golf Design, undertakes course architectural alterations," explained Paul. The last Lytham Open



featured 185 of the blighters and they were found by a total of 1618 balls during the four days of the Championship, a record which kept the BIGGA Greenkeeping Support Team busy!

"Apart from that there are very few changes to the course, although it may be a little more forgiving in places in terms of set-up."

Following in the footsteps of someone like Jimmy MacDonald could have been a daunting experience but Paul takes nothing but positives for the fact that he has someone of Jimmy's experience to call upon.

"We speak a lot on the phone and he says it will be a proud moment from him when he's sitting up in the stand watching the golf this time.

"I know it was a massive wrench for Jimmy when he retired and I'm sure he must miss the place but he popped

in for the Lytham Trophy when we were changing holes and he pointed out a few spots which I hadn't considered. I've always tried to switch on to his, and other, knowledge and way of thinking. I do selectively utilise other people's ideas and this, allied to my own academic achievements and experience, is the key to success."

Jimmy told Paul that he was aware that whoever got the job would make changes and, while saying that the hand over was seamless, there are differences in their approaches to the job.

"Jimmy was very much a people's person and I'd like to think I am as well. I like to encourage active, constructive opinions from the people I work with. I think that's important because, in a positive way, it means that all potential angles are covered."

While accepting that the pace of life in general and stresses in work have

increased greatly, Paul is thankful that he has an innate ability to switch off when he gets home of a night.

"I think I'm fortunate because it's a genetic thing. I also try to keep myself on the one level all the time not getting too negative or too positive about things. I don't think you'd be too successful in this profession if you were thin skinned."

Having said that, he hasn't particularly needed a thick skin during his recent spell at the Club.

"The Chairman is the model Chairman and the Secretary has been very helpful to me, while the members, in general, have been very appreciative of the course condition over the last few months."

Unlike the last two Opens at Carnoustie and St Andrews Paul hasn't introduced artificial aids to protect the fairways.

"I think one of the benefits of the winter we have suffered is that we've not had the amount of play we'd normally have and we've come into spring with pretty good sward coverage."

While in a bizarre way the weather helped in this regard, Paul is looking for help over the next few weeks to ensure the world's finest players face typical links conditions when they arrive at the course.

"Firm to hard and hard in places," he says in a manner which suggests its a links land mantra that he has been hearing ever since his greenkeeping career began.

If that is achieved he will be a proud man indeed as he stands at that presentation table.