





Scott MacCallum met up with Dave Sammels, Courses Superintendent at The De Vere Belfry to talk about the forthcoming Ryder Cup match

C Up for the Cup

You could make a strong case for arguing that the biggest sporting event of the year - and I haven't forgotten the Lions Tour, or the Ashes Series, or Wimbledon or the Super Bowl - will take place in Wishaw, near Sutton Coldfield, in the Midlands.

That is the home of The De Vere Belfry where the recently remodelled Brabazon Course will be the stage on which 24 of the world's finest golfers will compete for the Ryder Cup.

It may last only three days and have no prize money at stake but in each of the matches since the early 80s, it has never failed to produce drama which wouldn't be out of place at the Globe Theatre in nearby Stratford-upon-Avon.

The teams are now so evenly matched that every one of the 24 players, who tees it up during the two series of foursomes and fourballs and final day singles, knows that every single shot may prove to be of vital importance when it comes to tallying up the points at the end of the match.

With that in mind the condition of the course takes on almost mind numbing importance. What if a perfect 350 yard Tiger Woods drive finishes up in a divot... or a hole-bound Colin Montgomerie putt on the 18th green to win a match misses its target after being nudged off line by an old pitch mark? The fact that golf is an outdoor game and the rub

of the green is a major element wouldn't come into it. Perfection is what is expected and perfection is what is demanded.

You would think such a weighty responsibility would have the man in charge of getting the course close to that perfection waking up in a cold sweat at the very thought. Not so.

"I don't get sleepless nights thinking about the Ryder Cup and everything that goes along with it," revealed De Vere Belfry Courses Superintendent Dave Sammels.

"If I were to worry about it I'm sure I wouldn't sleep but I'm confident that we have everything covered and have contingency plans to cover all eventualities."

And if anyone is in a position to ensure every i is dotted and tee is cut it is Dave, who lives in a flat above his office and rarely leaves the gates of the De Vere Belfry during his working week.

He does admit, though, that the one thing that could go wrong is the one thing he can't control and that, as every greenkeeper knows, is the weather.

The problems that can cause were demonstrated dramatically at the Benson & Hedges International Open held earlier in the season, a tournament which acted as a dress rehearsal for the Ryder Cup.

Those watching the BBC coverage

on the final day will recall the heavy skies under which the last few matches completed their games. Minutes after the final putt was sunk the thunderstorm struck with such venom that lightning hit the television commentary box at the back of the 18th stand and pictures were lost.

"We were standing under the stand at the time and there was a huge bang and a bright light at the same time as the lightning hit," recalled Dave, who works closely with Brabazon Head Greenkeeper, Bevan Tattersall.

"It also struck a huge Scots pine on the main drive 12 feet from the top and completely shattered the tree, blowing pieces 50 yards in all directions. I'd never seen weather like it before."

Having said that, should the Weather Gods once again decide to turn their attention to the Midlands at the end of September the team will be as ready as they can possibly be.

"We have got plans in place for everything from getting water off the course to what happens if fog delays the start as happened in an earlier Ryder Cup match here," explained Dave, who is in charge of The De Vere Belfry's three courses, the Brabazon, the Derby and the recently-built PGA.

That planning has been underway virtually since the day Dave took over with meeting galore with the Ryder



Cup committee and European Ryder Cup Captain Sam Torrance himself.

"I've already had several meetings with Sam on how he would like the course set up for the match," revealed Dave.

"When I was in Boston for the last Ryder Cup I was interviewed by a television reporter who asked if I would be the 13th man on the team. I asked him if the Brookline Superintendent was the American's 13th man and although he didn't answer the inference was clear," revealed Dave.

"The set-up on the Brabazon will be done fairly... but in our favour," he smiled.

"Sam knows quite a bit about greenkeeping and he knows what he wants to give his guys the best chance of winning the Cup. For example, he knows how far the Americans can hit the ball and he knows how far we hit it. He knows the speed of the greens the Americans are used to and the speed of greens our guys are familiar with."

In short Sam will make sure the Europeans have everything in their

favour as much as possible with the longer hitting Americans perhaps finding the fairways narrowing the further down they go or the greens not quite as fast as they would expect on their own Tour - all of it no more than the Europeans expect when they are the visiting team.

The players will find the rough four inches long with the semi an inch and a half while the likelihood is that the greens will be stimping at between 10.5 and 12.

During the week of the match the greenkeeping team will comprise of the 13 permanent members of the Brabazon team, supplemented by the 15 from the other two courses - nine on the PGA and six on the Derby - six students, who do strimming and fly mowing in the summer, and six additional greenkeepers from Slaley Hall and Carden Park, two other De Vere resorts.

"Normally there is quite a bit of banter between our three teams - each team has a name, the Brabazon staff are called Brabwrackers, there is the PGA Scum and the Derby Dingles - but we will all be pulling together to make sure everything is right during the week," said Dave, hinting at the wicked humour that flies around the maintenance facility.

They will not be short of equipment to make sure the standards are met with John Deere, the official supplier

to the De Vere Belfry adding to the regular armoury of machinery leading up to and during the week itself.

"We will be hand mowing all greens and tees and will have 18 machines, plus a couple of spares, to do the job. We will also be using greens triples to cut the fairways," said Dave.

The team will begin at first light and cut the entire course. On the first two days, when there is a foursomes series followed by a fourball series, the greens, tees and fairways will be cut again midway through the day and all divots replaced. This will be repeated at the close of play.

"We can cut the entire course in around an hour with an individual green taking about 20 minutes."

While it is easy to appreciate the nerves the players will be feeling during the week it would also be easy to underestimate the pressure the greens staff will be under. With high in the sky camera positions and huge grandstands any less than perfect mowing lines will be blatantly obvious but Dave knows his team are up to the job.

"We have some of the best green-





keepers anywhere in Britain here - one of them is known as "Laser" Luke because his lines are so straight - and everyone is up to the job. They are all buzzing about the Ryder Cup," said Dave, who expects many of them to move on once they have the Ryder Cup on their CVs.

"I've told them I don't mind as long as they go away from here to be Head Greenkeepers - if they move sideways I'll kick them out the door. All are good enough to be at least First Assistants. We train them all on side here and I'm proud of our record for training."

While the course is being brought to a peak for the week of the Ryder Cup the general standard is something The De Vere Belfry strives to maintain day-in-day-out

"We operate a five day shift rather than a five day week so we've always got cover on the golf courses. It saves the courses going up and down and we can keep the standard high all the time," said Dave, who likes nothing more than getting out on to the golf course and doing whatever job needs done.

"People see the course on television and expect it to be the same when they arrive for a game. It is our job to make sure it lives up to expectations 365 days a year."

When Dave is not working he heads back to his home in Edinburgh, where his wife and brother run the family business, Edinburgh Landscapes.

It was through Edinburgh Landscapes that Dave first became involved with the soon-to-be four time Ryder Cup venue.

The company had worked closely with Dave Thomas, the original co-designer of the Brabazon with Peter Alliss, on a number of other golf courses including Westerwood near Cumbernauld and the Roxburghie in the Scottish Borders, and he asked Dave to give him a price for growing-in the new PGA course.

"At the end of that contract I was asked if I wanted a job here, initially as Course Manager of the Derby and PGA courses. I was asked as we walked around the course and the further we walked the more I fancied the idea. I can't tell you why I wanted to come here. It was a big challenge and

I suppose I was getting older as well and didn't want to lose what was a great opportunity for me," explained Dave, who took on the additional responsibility for the Brabazon six months later.

A visitor to this year's Ryder Cup, not having visited The De Vere Belfry since the last match was played there in '93 might be forgiven for thinking he'd shown up at the wrong venue such has been the number of changes to the course since then.

"It would be easier to say what we haven't changed about the course rather than go through what we have," smiled Dave, hinting at the extensive nature of the face lift the Brabazon had been on the receiving end of, costing almost £2.5 million.

With that he runs through a list which covers virtually every hole, sometimes fundamental amendments, other times mere tweaks. Indeed included among the changes are two completely new holes in the 3rd and 4th. The 3rd has moved from being a straight par-4 to being a dog-legged par-5 with a pond in front while the 4th used to be a par-5 but

is now a par-4, again with a pond guarding the green.

"The work has been done for the betterment of the golf course as a whole and not just for the Ryder Cup and now it is a mature course which is going from strength to strength," said Dave, whose personal input included the addition of 14 magnificent brick bridges around the course.

Pleasingly, both Dave and Bevan have been invited to all of the official engagements during the week, including the Opening and Closing ceremonies but Dave isn't fazed by the prospect of rubbing shoulders with the likes of Tiger and Monty.

"I think being a Scotsman you think 'A man's a man for a' that'. They might play golf better than me but I can do other things better than them so as far as I'm concerned we're equals. I do admire them though."

Such is the excellence of the work that has been done at The De Vere Belfry recently, coupled with that during the week of the match itself Dave Sammels and his team will have the admiration of all the players and the rest of the greenkeeping fraternity.