

# Course Feature

## Hitting the Heights

Royal St George's is known for the bunker known as the Himalayas but, as Scott MacCallum found out, in all other respects as well the course is hitting the peaks in preparation for this year's Open Championship



The daunting challenge facing golfers on the 4th tee

Fifty years ago last May the pinnacle of the Himalayas was finally climbed when Edmond Hillary and Sherpa Tensing stood atop Everest. This month the Himalayas will again be in the spotlight when the world's top golfers converge on Royal St George's Golf Club on the south coast.

Confused? Well, in this case, the Himalayas is the name given to the immense, mountainous bunker which faces golfers playing the 4th and, with a new tee in place for this year's Open, it is a near certainty that several unfortunate players, along with their "sherpa" caddies, will be forced to make reluctant assaults on the face of the bunker.

One of the abiding memories of the 1993 Open - other than the fact on the final round it boasted a leaderboard littered with the top players of the day and Greg Norman's final round 64 was one of the finest ever to win a Major Championship - was of Australian, Mike Harwood, tangling with the Himalayas.

"His ball stuck in the face of the bunker and he tried to go forward, failed, then tried to go backwards before going forward again," recalled Head Greenkeeper, Neil Metcalf, who was Deputy Head at the time.

The famous bunker, which has a twin at St Enodoc Golf Club, was revamped about five years ago with new sleepers installed and a huge digger used to dig it out.

Although the most famous of the course's 106 bunkers Neil and his team have ensured that most of them have been brought up to tip top condition for July.

"We began working on the bunkers in 2001-2 when we took on 50 of them - our own team doing half and BSP Landscapes doing the other half. It is no easy job as our bunkers are very steep with steep faces and each one was a major job in itself.

"Then over the last winter we did all the bunkers on the 1st, 18th, all the par-3s and any others that we identified as being in need of attention," explained Neil, who became Head Greenkeeper on 1 January 1996.

Royal St George's has a superb Open pedigree with a roll of honour which includes some of the game's biggest names. Greg Norman won the last Championship and Sandy Lyle the one before that in '85 to become the first British Champion in 16 years. Other Champions include Bill Rogers; Bobby Locke; Henry Cotton, in 1934, during which one round inspired the famous Dunlop 65 ball; Walter Hagen; Harry Vardon and JH Taylor.

The club learned that it would be hosting the greatest Championship in the world in 1998 and they have been working towards July 2003 since then. Neil's preparations started in earnest in the year 2000 when work on fairway width and definition began.



The Royal St George's Team

"The R&A gave us a guideline that they wanted the width of fairways to be between 25 and 30 metres and it was up to me to go out with a machine and shape them after that. There are exceptions where, because of specific bunkering, the fairways will be 40 metres wide," explained Neil, who was also pleased to be able to retain more generous widths on the regular members' landing areas.

"It actually differs quite a bit from '93 when the fairways were very wide and I'll be very interested to see the final video footage from this year's Championship and compare it with then. There will be many metres difference."

Players will be relieved that Neil was quick to point out that Carnoustie-like fairway widths were not on the agenda.

"If we did that many of our bunkers would end up 30 yards into the rough," said Neil, whose team have been working flat out in the run up to the Championship.

The other guidelines he is working to are two metres width for the first cut of rough at two and a half inches, then another two metres of second rough cut at four inches.

In addition to the tighter fairways players will find themselves facing a significantly longer golf course.

"It started with the par-5 14th which runs to the left of an out-of-bounds line. We raised the green and moved it back, closer to the out-of-bounds which lengthened the hole and enabled us to move the 15th tee back as well to also lengthen that hole.

"It has made the 14th a much better hole which threatens on both the tee and second shots," said Neil of the change that was implemented five years ago.

Other changes, including that previously mentioned at the 4th, have been combined to ensure that the challenge of Royal St George's can match the increased armoury the modern day player carries from 10 years ago.

The next phase in the long term preparations for the Championship came with the installation of a new state-of-the-art Rainbird irrigation system which, as the Law of both Sod and Murphy would dictate, heralded the arrival of flooding which had the nearby White Cliffs of Dover unsure of the direction in which they should be facing.

"It was the flooding which affected much of the country in 1999. Thousands of homes in the area, and nationally, were suffering and we were no different," recalled Neil.

"When the rain came, it came down in a monsoon fashion that I hadn't seen before. We just couldn't get the water off the land quick enough and the course just couldn't cope with the amount of water it was holding. Over the winter period we pumped between 50 and 55 million gallons of water off the course and into the nearby North Stream," said Neil, who said that ironically the club has an abstraction licence which allows them to take up to 25 million gallons out of the self same stream.

"We were in credit by 25 million gallons!"

It was around this time that rumours abounded about Royal St George's long term problems, the more malicious of which cast doubt on the club's ability to recover fully to the extent that The Open might have had to be moved. Among those was one that the Environment Agency had proposed that the water table in the area had to remain at a specified level which would have had a detrimental affect on the links golf played in the area.

"There was no truth in any of the rumours that were flying around at the time and, indeed, had The Open been here in the July of that year we would have been able to host it comfortably as the course was back in fine condition," said Neil firmly.

The freak conditions which contributed to that flooding haven't returned since and the only long term consequences have been that Neil has found that grass growth has been a lot quicker. The ground is still getting rid of water and the water table is still high so the grass is reacting to the moisture in the ground.

When he took over the reins of the course in '96 Neil was keen to instigate his own maintenance policy which entailed upping the vertidrain programme - in the winter he likes to create fissures under the soil to encourage the root systems of the fescues and bents - reducing the fertiliser input and starving the grass of water. But knowing the pain barrier that the course would have to go through he waited until after the Amateur Championship which was held later that year.



Neil Metcalf

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So it was after the Championship, which was won by fellow Scot Craig Watson beating Trevor Immelman in the final, that the programme was put in place.

"The members and the Chair of Green were very understanding because they knew what we were wanting to achieve. I did say at the outset that we probably wouldn't see any real difference for at least five years while we went through the process of starving the meadow grass out and obviously the more it starves the more it flowers because it is hungry," said Neil.

It was ironic that having almost completed the process the flooding arrived, but three years further on the course is in good shape and Neil can't wait for the third week in July. Together with his Chairman of Green, Michael Attenborough, they have been heavily involved in the preparation work which goes towards hosting such a huge event.

"Fortunately we have a lot of land outwith the golf course and a lot of the hospitality areas are off the golf course, but we have to liaise with the on-site contractors to ensure damage is kept to a minimum before, during and after the Championship."

To prepare for everything Neil spent some time with Colin Irvine, of Muirfield, quizzing him on what to expect.

"I went up to Muirfield in April last year and again after the Championship and Colin helped me a lot by telling me about potential pitfalls and aggravations," said Neil, who is a former North East of Scotland golfer, who despite playing very infrequently manages to maintain a handicap of 3.

He is sure that he will feel immense pride when he is standing at the prize table alongside the 2003 Open Champion.

"It is the Championship everyone wants to win and it will have been played over my golf course. It will be the pinnacle of my career," said the man, who for that moment will experience how Edmond Hilary felt 50 years and two months before.

## MACHINERY INVENTORY

4 John Deere 2500 Greens mowers  
Toro 3100 Greensmaster  
John Deere 2653A Banks Mower  
Ransomes T-Plex 180  
John Deere 3235B Mower  
Ransomes Fairway 300  
2 Cushman Trucksters (Diesel)  
2 Cushman Juniors (Petrol)  
2 E-Z-GO Workhorse Vehicles  
Ransomes GA 30  
Massey Ferguson Tractor  
Ransomes CT 445 Tractor  
John Deere 4410 Tractor  
John Deere 4700 Tractor  
Kubota 1550 Compact Tractor  
Jacobsen HR 5111 Rotary  
Ransomes 933 Rotary  
Jacobsen AR 250 Rotary  
300L Hardi Sprayer  
600L Hardi Sprayer with shrouded boom  
Hayter Condor  
Richard Long 1502 Flail/Collector

If you fancy a flutter on The Open  
Greenkeeper International readers can take  
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payouts from betting experts Globet.

See page 6 for details on how  
you can place your bets

