

# Course Feature



▲ Billy McLachlan

Matthew is the youngest member of the McLachlan family and has watched his dad, Course Manager, Billy, prepare the famous old course for the most important Championship in golf.

The family home is right on the golf course, half way along the 16th fairway, and Matthew has seen incredible comings and goings, particularly over the last few months.

"He watched all the staging arrive and be stored outside his front door and he became very protective towards it. He was always checking to make sure everything was ok. He was almost in tears when the contractors came and moved it up to the 18th green," said Billy, who is preparing for his second Open in charge, having been at the helm in 1997.

With two of his four children experiencing their first Open – the other being Laura, aged six – and the other two, Emma, 10, and David, 13, much more able to appreciate what their dad is involved with this time around, you get the impression Billy is relishing the prospect of the world's finest golfers coming to play.

"The kids are excited about all the hype of The Open and, touch wood, at some stage, when the weather is good and everything is under control, I'll be able to get out with the kids and show them what it's all about," said Billy.

With one successful Open Championship under his belt – the course in '97 received rave reviews – Billy and his team are confident everything is and will be done to ensure a successful 2004 Championship.

When we met in early June the weather had been kind, the course preparation was well up to schedule and Billy was ensuring that every element which goes towards building an Open Championship site was well co-ordinated. Nothing being left to chance.

"Not knowing what another contractor has done could cause problems so I'm very big on communications and everyone knowing what everyone else is doing. Otherwise silly things could happen which shouldn't happen but can be done before you know it. It's all down to communication or to be more accurate a lack of it."

During the week itself Billy is keen to ensure that his team are not overloaded with sets of new instructions or jobs to do.

"I've said that when the week arrives I don't want a whole lot of things thrown at me or the team. I want everyone to have their mind on the job

## A Family Affair

Scott MacCallum met up with Billy McLachlan who was deep in preparations for this month's Open Championship

For one little four-year-old this month Christmas will be coming early. Matthew McLachlan wasn't around when the last Open Championship was played at Royal Troon but this year he will be in the thick of the action.



▲ Royal Troon Greenkeeping Team

and not facing distractions and I don't want them arriving in the morning absolutely knackered, or rushing to finish a job, and making a mistake or having an accident. Make it simple and keep it simple is the motto."

"The length of the day is quite frightening. Tired people make mistakes and concentration goes and it might result in cutting into a green a little bit harder, or driving a machine into a bunker.

"It's a case of how are we going to keep the guys going to the extent that they are not walking around on Friday like half shut knives. If I can keep their work load down during the actual week it is a sign that everything is going well and that will please me and keep them fresh."

It is here that Billy is drawing on the experiences of the last Open.

"From last time we have a routine that we know and I know what jobs need to be done, what way to do them and how many bodies I need to do them. Last time I was never sure if I had enough men or, just as bad, too many. What if I had six guys standing around doing nothing?"

"Having done it last time I don't have that sort of worry this time... although we could have a wet week and throw everything out."

One thing Billy was able to do last time and he hopes to maintain this time, is to grab a couple of hours sleep in the afternoon.

"It's exactly the right thing to do. I'm still contactable. If the phone goes I wake up but you need to stay sharp to make the correct calls when you need to."

That's all very well but he perhaps wasn't at his sharpest last time round when, after a quick power nap, he got up, walked back onto the course and promptly left the back door open much to the dismay of wife, Andrea.



▲ The 11th

"She said to me 'There's 40,000 people walking past our house and you left the door open!'," he said smiling ruefully at the memory. The chances of him making the same mistake again must be slim.

He is particularly happy to be able to call upon the BIGGA Greenkeeping Support Team which, in addition to sending out a man with each group to rake all the bunkers, will prepare all the bunkers before the start of play each day.

"Golf starts at 6.30am on the Thursday and Friday this year earlier than the last time we were here and knowing that the Support team will be doing the bunkers allows us to concentrate on the cutting programme," said Billy, who recently took delivery of seven new John Deere hand mowers.

The greens on Royal Troon and its sister course, the Portland, have been regularly hand cut recently and Billy is delighted that he is in a position to do just that.

"We are very fortunate as others may want to hand cut but not be able to."

It is all part of a very progressive policy put in place by the club.

"I have a very positive committee and every Greens Convenor I've had since I've been here has been excellent. This year's Captain, Arthur Dunsmuir was Greens Convenor at the last Open while the current Greens Convenor, Ken Arthur, is another excellent guy.

"I'm very lucky with the people I work with. The Committee, the members and my own team are all great," he said, before pausing, laughing and adding. "Something is bound to go wrong now."

He has a staff of 14 including his two Deputies Gary Ross, who works on Royal Troon and his brother, John McLachlan, who works on the Portland.

The team was given a recent taste of a high profile event when it hosted the 2003 Amateur Championship and they treated the event as a dress rehearsal for this month's Open.

"The course will be set up the same as it was for the Amateur, although I'd say the rough might be less than last year, because it's been a little colder this year," said Billy, who recalled a white frost and a -1 degree temperature at the end of May.



▲ The 4th



▲ The 18th



▲ The 5th

Indeed the course won't have too many dramatic changes from the '97 Open other than a few new tees and revamped bunkers.

"The 1st tee is the biggest change as it has now moved to the right giving the hole a new shape and perspective. It is set up into the shore and more along the shoreline.

"As for the bunkers we've done all the faces since the Amateur. We've not heightened them but just taken the crown off and straightened the angle a little bit. Some of the members have mentioned to me that they can't get out of them. I can understand where they are coming from, the bunker faces are steep, but it is The Open."

Ten new bunkers have been built bringing the total for the course to 93.

Billy retains two strong memories of his last Open Championship. One was the wonderful way the Champion, Justin Leonard, took time to sign a complete set of flags for Billy to give to his team just a few minutes after being presented with the Claret Jug and the second is another lesson he has learned from for this year.

"On the final afternoon it was fairly relaxed and I sent the team home for a few hours and went for a walk. Then I noticed these huge dark clouds moving towards Troon.

"Twenty-four hours later the course was evacuated because of the rain and it would have stopped the golf that final afternoon had it been a little earlier. I would have had all sorts of trouble and my team wouldn't have been on hand immediately. It was a silly mistake."

Despite all the pressure which goes with the territory of managing an Open venue Billy is looking forward to his second Championship in charge.

"It sounds daft, but I am looking forward to the week, getting it done, enhancing the reputation of Troon; suffering no disasters and everyone getting something out of it."

Perhaps no-one will get more out of it than young Matthew, who, you never know, might put all his experience of this year to good use when he's Course Manager for the 2034 Open Championship.

*Photographs courtesy of Brian Morgan.*



▲ The 6th



▲ The 8th