

With its bright green course and colourful flourishing backdrop Augusta National is the bane of most greenkeepers' lives



A Word with Alliss

With April heralding the annual outbreak of Augusta Syndrome Scott MacCallum speaks with a man who has been a feature of Augusta for nearly 40 years.

So here we are again. April, and the Masters will be filling the television screens with spectacular golf on a course which fits every club member's vision of what a golf course should be.

Augusta National is perfection personified. Very few of us have ever been lucky enough to visit but we all know the course, particularly the back nine, as if it were our own.

A little draw to get the big bounce down the 10th fairway; a deep breath for Amen Corner - avoid the lake to the left of the 11th; vital club selection on the 12th and hitting a perfect right to left drive on 13 to give a chance of making the green in two - Amen to that; but then there is the terrifyingly slopy 14th green; the 15th where you can find water both in front or behind the green; up comes the 16th where every well struck tee shot feeds down to the hole and looks a dead cert to go in; the 17th with a well positioned tee shot giving a chance to just clear the bunker guarding the green and leave a birdie putt; then a deep breath before attempting the claustrophobic drive up the last, hopefully missing the bunkers, gives a chance to leave a makeable putt on the famous last green.

The colours are amazing. The caddies' white overalls setting off the vivid green of the fairways and greens; the stunning rhododendrons and azaleas; the carpeted bridges, the pure white sand in the bunkers and the blue water of Rae's Creek and the many lakes.

Then there's the greens themselves. Is there anything more extraordinary than watching a player strike a putt away from the hole and then waiting 40 seconds for it to find its way all around the green to the hole side or sometimes, miraculously, in?

Now, if you just spent a little more time preparing your own course properly, surely you could come up with something nearly as good. I'm not so stupid as to expect something exactly the same, after all I know the weather's always better in America and from what I see there are a few more staff at Augusta than at your place, but how much sun or people does it need to get greens to stimp at 14?

It's the same every year. The US Masters is the bane of greenkeepers' lives but you do have a champion out there and he comes from an unlikely source.

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There speaks a man who has been attending the Masters for over 40 years and whose voice is synonymous not just with the Masters but every top golfing event of the last 30 years - Peter Alliss.

Yes, the man who has provided the soundtrack to our golfing history knows that there can be no comparison between what he commentates upon in Georgia every April and what the rest of us are involved with.

In other words at Augusta - It's golf, Jim, but not as we know it.

"There is a lot of falseness about Augusta. It's a bit like preparing for the Chelsea Flower Show, where plants are forced on and arrive in buckets and everyone is desperate to keep the plants alive for a week. A lot of that happens at Augusta where they do supply the rhododendrons and azaleas in pots if the weather hasn't been conducive to bringing them on, just so that it looks wonderful," explained Peter.

And if your members get a little depressed, as they gaze out of your clubhouse window onto a deserted putting green and a fourball trudging towards the 18th green, at the thought of Augusta members sitting in their colonial style clubhouse perched high above the course taking in a view that is golf's equivalent of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, listen to Peter.

"When you look out from the Augusta clubhouse all you can see are acres of mown grass without a feature on it. Put all the people there, though, and it looks completely different."

Peter has been the voice of BBC Television Golf for many years, taking over the mantle from the great Henry Longhurst, and he has described many of the finest Masters' moments.

He was there in 1980 when Seve burst on to the scene and became the youngest ever champion. In '86, he described Jack Nicklaus' incredible back nine to become the oldest man to win the title. He was the man who, in '88, coaxed Sandy Lyle's amazing

fairway bunker shot down the green towards the hole to give him the birdie chance that made him the first ever British winner. The very next year he peered through the gloom to see Nick Faldo win the first of his two





play-offs. He revelled in Ian Woosnam's bended knee celebration in '91 and looked on in astonished fashion as Tiger Woods rewrote the record book six years later. Peter Alliss has been there and, in modern parlance, talked the talk. As a result he knows Augusta National better than virtually any visitor from these shores.

"What people don't understand, and I'm talking about single figure players, is just how fast the Augusta greens are. Regular club golfers just couldn't conceive of it," spoken with the air of a man who knows that if we faced such pacy greens every week the country's psychiatrists would be coining it in.

"The money they spend at Augusta is extraordinary yet they only have 280 members and the course is closed for five months every year. I did see their greenkeeping budget once and it was several million dollars a year, every year," said Peter, adding that he knew they overseeded the entire course every year.

"From a greenkeeping point of view when you get members at home who ask why can't our course be like Augusta, all I can say is that they have no concept of the money that is poured into Augusta every year. They have no concept of the climate, which is awful for the five months the course is closed - the temperature and humidity are unbearable and they actually install fans in the trees to circulate the air."

In his 40 years of visiting Augusta Peter has been on a mission, although in recent years lack of success has curbed his enthusiasm somewhat.

"I have never found a weed, even in the rough. I used to go looking for them but I've given up now. I'm sure you'd have to go 100 yards of the property to find a weed. It is just magnificent."

Peter is well aware of the idealistic and unrealistic expectations of golf club members.

"I've said this many times but at least 85% of all members want to arrive at the club when it suits them and walk onto the 1st tee with nobody there. They want 18 holes of golf and then drop into the clubhouse for a quick pint or just go straight back into the car and home. They want the course in good order with nice flags fluttering; nice soapy water in the ball cleaners and all for £400 or £500 a year.

"Then they'll come up to the greenkeeper and ask why the hollow coring must be done the very week when he's got a week's holiday. The average member has no conception of being a supporter."

He is also an advocate of traditional golf and is left open mouthed by some of the new style courses which are being built, particularly in the States.

"Some of the courses in the States are like ornamental gardens. For example, I went to see the new Donald Trump course last year and it had some wonderful, but ridiculous, waterfalls. Great feats of engineering and silliness. It's like playing golf in an artificial world."

He also feels that there are a lot of golf developers who live in a fantasy world with every new golf course supposed to be a par-72.

"You produce a wonderful golf course with a par of 70 and people think it's Mickey Mouse, because it's only par-70 - God forbid if it were to be par-68. But I maintain the most difficult course in the world would be four par-3s between 190 and 225 yards and 14 par-4s at 470 yards long. It would be a par-68 but you could bring Tiger Woods over and he'd go round all day long and not break par."

So here's a chance for Peter, with the ear of the greenkeeping profession, to get anything of his own off his chest.

"Sand in the bunker! I would like to start a campaign at every golf course in the country to have bunkers forked over on April 1. Everywhere I go I see bunkers with no sand in them, probably because of the raking system. I don't want a foot of sand but you could tickle the sand to loosen up a couple of inches. That's the one criticism I'd make," he said.



Warming to his theme he laid out his blueprint for a well run golf club.

"I'd try to get the very best greenkeeper I could, but also the best steward; the best cook - you don't want a chef; a good Secretary; a good pro and a good assistant. If you've got all those ingredients it will work. The course can be very ordinary but if you keep it neat and tidy with a good attention to detail people will say how nice it looks and keep coming back. It's like having a cheap pair of

shoes, if they are clean and looked after they will be fine but if they are dirty and neglected they look awful," said Peter, who has great respect for greenkeepers.

"It's a hell of a job for greenkeepers. It's not a thankless task as it is very rewarding but I don't think in all honesty enough good greenkeepers get enough praise. They are the hub of any club.

"As for the Augusta Syndrome. It's silly and unobtainable."

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