

Course Feature



Euan Grant

History in the Making

Scott MacCallum meets Euan Grant, a man who fulfils an ambition at this year's Open Championship

It happens every five years and for many it really is THE Open when it does. I'm talking about a St Andrews Open Championship. Golf at the home of the game, an occasion which invariably provides moments in history that will be recalled for generations.

Doug Sanders' most famous missed putt of all time; Jack Nicklaus' two victories; Seve's joyous fist pumping when he birdied the last to confirm his win; Nick Faldo's domination; John "Wild Thing" Daly's play-off win after Costantino Rocca's amazing putt at the last forced a play off and Tiger Woods becoming the latest and the youngest man to complete the set of Majors. All command important notes in the annals of golfing history and all have occurred within the last 35 years. Of course, there are chapters on St Andrews going right back to Alan Robertson and Old Tom Morris.

"Luck!" is the one word answer, accompanied by a hearty laugh, which you get when you ask him how it turned out this way.

"I had no idea it would happen. It was pure circumstance, right place right time."

His arrival at the Old Course, less than 18 months before the Championship is all the more remarkable as he spent a period of time out of greenkeeping when he left Westerham.

"I'd loved greenkeeping since university and I knew that was what I wanted to do but I had an offer to work for the family civil engineering

company and I gave it a chance. But I missed greenkeeping big time and apparently I was miserable. I'd kept up my BIGGA membership and was reading the magazine avidly, going onto the website and talking to my pals about the weather and how particular grasses were doing," explained Euan, a former Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year.

"Eventually I spoke with Kenny Mackay, at Marriot Forest of Arden, and thankfully he had the confidence in his own ability to give me, a former Course Manager, a job as his Deputy. He saw it as a good opportunity to get someone in who could do a good job so it worked well and I learned a lot from Kenny, particularly about attention to detail, and worked on several European Tour events," although Euan readily

admits he'd have taken any job at that stage just to get back into the industry.

Euan had explained to Kenny that he would look for his own course and that came when another man took a chance on him, this time Gordon Moir, Links Supervisor at St Andrews Links, who appointed him Head Greenkeeper of The New Course.

"It's a great golf course, possibly my favourite, rated 36th best in the UK, and I rang Gordon on the deadline day for the job and asked him if he'd got their man and if not could we could have a chat. I've done that before and it seems to work, although it would backfire if they happened to be out that day."

While on The New he worked closely with Eddie Adams on The Old Course and he learned a lot from the man who he was ultimately to succeed.



The St. Andrews' Old Course greenkeeping team

What will happen this year to join them? You can be sure someone will step up to the mark.

One man who will enjoy every single moment of the 2005 Open Championship is Euan Grant who will be experiencing his first Open Championship as Head Greenkeeper.

I first met Euan nine years ago when he was Course Manager at Westerham Golf Club, in Kent. He said at that stage that his ambition was to be the headman at an Open venue. This time round we met in the superb Links Clubhouse in St Andrews as he was making final preparation for this year's Open.

Any thought that this was the culmination of a well planned drive towards a top position at the most famous golf course in the world is quickly dismissed by Euan, who is as unassuming and modest as he is talented, readily admitting that there are better greenkeepers than him working on the Links.



"Eddie is a phenomenal fescue greenkeeper. I don't think anyone can touch him on his knowledge of The Old Course and he was always free with his advice. In fact on my first day in the job he caught me on my hands and knees looking at one of his greens. I was always asking him to come over and take a look at things for me."

Euan revelled in his work on The New Course using it as an opportunity to try out different things. "We stressed the greens out, we overseeded, we ripped into them we even tried Short Cut. I had no idea that The Old Course would be my next step."

That opportunity arose when Eddie was lured away to the European Tour and the chance to work on golf courses all over the world and Euan grabbed his chance to step up to the Old Course.

"It was a baptism of fire as we had The Amateur Championship within six weeks and then the Dunhill Links Championship at the end of the season and, of course, the prospect of The Open the following year."

He sometimes has to pinch himself that things have turned out the way they have.

"Every morning, when I drive in across Granny Clarke's Wynd, I think how lucky I am. It's a wonderful honour and privilege to be custodian of The Old Course and while working closely with our committees and trustees means I don't have a free hand to do whatever I want, I wouldn't want to make too many changes anyway."

What he has done is tweak some of the maintenance practices and let the rough grow a little.

"We are using greens triples on the fairways so we can use the groomer units and give a tighter cut while reducing the wear from dedicated fairway mowers" he said, adding that come July the fairways will be stimping at roughly the same as the greens.

"The fairways are running at seven and a half at the moment but given decent weather we will have them running at nine and a half or ten for The Open. Because of the 11th which is very exposed we can't have the greens over 10 and a half as we would be right on the edge, although we could get 13 or 14 out of some of the greens if we wanted."

He does believe that uniformity of speed shouldn't necessarily be a prerequisite for a golf course.

"I think practice rounds should allow players to determine the speed of various greens. Our 18th green is surrounded by buildings and on heavier soil that the 7th and 11th which are completely exposed and on pure sand, so to have them the same requires tweaking. That isn't a problem, but is that how golf should be played?" he questioned.

As for the rough, there is a little more on The Old Course than there has been in the past, but Euan is well aware that it is a course for the people and shouldn't be made too difficult to get round.

"I know in the back of my mind that people still talk about being able to putt their way round the golf course and in theory that is the case but allowing the grass to grow around banks and creating more habitats for wildlife is, I think, a change for the better."

People queue in the hope of a game from 3am - those who do will invariably be rewarded, even if it means waiting until 4pm - but it does cause Euan his greatest headache - divots.

"We still use mats from November to the end of March on The Old and alternate monthly on the other courses so the locals can always find a course to play off natural turf. What you do find is that everyone heads to the courses on the natural turf and the other courses are a lot quieter. Another annoyance is the golfer who takes two practice shots and two divots before lining up on the mat.

"We are trying to promote fescue grasses but they are slow growing grasses and slow to germinate, added to the fact that we don't feed or water," he said, adding that they had a team of dedicated sand patchers,"

They patch the entire course every Sunday, the only day when the course is closed, which affords the team the opportunity to do a lot of its maintenance work uninterrupted.

In the lead-up to The Open the regular team of 12 has been joined by one member of staff from each of the other 18 hole courses on the Links while their places on the other course are taken by seasonal workers, many of whom travel for all corners of the world to have the chance to work at St Andrews. They get the chance to work on the Old Course on Sundays.



During the week of The Open staff from all over the Links will be drafted in to help.

"It is a big team but we have huge double greens - the 5th/13th takes two guys 40 minutes to cut and to cut the greens six mowers will walk on average seven and a half miles each. We will also have six guys on bunkers every morning. As the course is out and in we have to be out early to avoid play."

Earlier in the year Euan met with the Championship Committee to determine pin positions and in the lead up to July they have kept well away from them, and changed holes every three days instead of the usual daily so that there would be fewer heads on the greens.

One of the final jobs Eddie Adams handled before leaving was to construct some new Championship tees adding length to the course.

"We are at our maximum now but strangely having the extra length should help the pace of play which is the R&A's biggest headache. There are several par-4s which would be driveable so the extra length means they don't have to wait on the tee, although the Championship Committee is considering having some call-on holes to speed things up."

Everyone pulls together on the Links teams and while each course has its own equipment they have to book out the specialist aeration or spraying equipment.

"The Old Course can't pull rank so you have to be organised and plan well ahead," said Euan.

All the Head Greenkeepers meet weekly with Gordon Moir to share information and discuss various ideas and issues to the benefit of all. Surely a Brains' Trust that would be the envy of many?

Euan is a fairly phlegmatic character, not a lot ruffles him, and he is sure that his team have the experience - his five senior greenkeepers have 19 Opens between them - and skill to meet any challenge that is thrown at them during the week. That just leaves the upside. What is he particularly looking forward to?

"I'm looking forward to seeing the golf course on the telly knowing it is going out to millions and that my staff had done their absolute best to produce it. It would also be nice to hear press conferences where the players are praising the course. I suppose that would be the ultimate."

So you can be sure that there will be some memorable exploits at St Andrews this year but Euan will be logging everything, even the most mundane, in his personal memory banks.

