



ROUGH JUSTICE

Scott MacCallum chats with John Philp, about preparations for this year's Open and looks back at the most controversial Championship of recent times

Let's rewind to the end of April and a function room within the excellent Carnoustie Hotel, which overlooks the 18th green of this year's Open venue. The annual R&A press conference has just finished and one man is surrounded by the nation's golf writers, with a battery of dictaphones and tape recorders stuck inches from his nose.

Carnoustie Links Superintendent, John Philp, is the man at the centre of all the attention. Eight years ago he was identified as being responsible for the famous links being renamed "Carnasty", when many players hit out at the playability of the course. John was infamously described as "an out of control greenkeeper" who, among other devilish acts, had fertilised the rough in a warped attempt to make the players look foolish.

Three months ahead of this year's Championship the press were taking their chance to quiz the man himself.

John coped with all the attention admirably, answering the questions as fully as he could and certainly giving as good as he got in a relaxed, honest, and up-front manner.

What those golf writers missed out on, however, was the opportunity to sit down with John at length and listen to his philosophies on golf course management and on his beloved Carnoustie Links.

For example, had they heard him talk about the work he and his staff have done to reward a player for finding the fairway, or ensuring consistency of bounce when the ball lands, they would have discovered a man as knowledgeable as he is passionate on the subject of fine turf and golf. They would also have learned more about the reasons why so many of the world's best struggled in '99.

Sitting in his office, close to the 10th green on the Championship course and 5th green of the excellent Burnside course, John first of all paid tribute to his team and outlined some of the work they have been doing since the Open's last visit.

"I've got a wonderful team and, although they are split over our three courses, they combined over the winter to re-do over 90 bunkers on the Championship course. We have 26 greenstaff in total, as well as four in the workshop, some of whom were here in '99, but also a lot of lads working on an Open for the first time. My staff produce the highest standards of workmanship and I'm very proud of their achievements.

"I am very fortunate to have very talented people in key positions. Sandy Reid is the skilful and committed head man on the championship course and Eric Watson with his wealth of experience leads the workshop team. I have worked with my Deputy, Paul O'Connor since 1990. He has an impeccable knowledge of links turf management and has been instrumental in the development at Carnoustie Links over the years."

The team has spent a lot of time trying to get a balance on the fairways between low areas, which obviously can be a little lush and higher parts so that they will perform similarly.

"The ball is not going to sit on a crown, it's going to roll into the hollows but we feel that the crowned area is the type of turf, providing a nice tight lie, that enables a player, with the skill to do it, to squeeze the ball out and get spin."

For a good number of years the team has been verticutting and hollow coring to get as much sand into the low areas to give them the same playability quality as those higher areas.

“We’ll cut these areas a bit lower, 6-7 mm is not uncommon in good growth, to control the mixed grass sward. We also overseed the higher areas with fescue, adding wetting agent and liquid seaweed where necessary to hold moisture and retain sward density. The Hydroject has been a great tool for us.”

John is well aware that this sort of high intensity work is not something many clubs could tackle.

“We’re fortunate that we have a big enough staff and the equipment to do this compared with the more limited staff single course clubs would have,” said John, who when asked whose turf he envies most, offered up Muirfield, Gullane and, in particular, Luffness.

“I get a lift when I go to these places and look around. Basic greenkeeping principles have been followed over the decades and they haven’t had to fight back from misguided agricultural policies.”

Back at Carnoustie - where John has had a constant battle with rye grass contamination in many playing areas brought in as a new “super grass” many decades ago - and having catered for the skilled golfer, who has found the fairway from the tee, John and his team were intent on ensuring that the player could then be rewarded when it comes to the shot in to the green.

“When the ball lands on the approach or the green itself you want a reaction on the ball that is consistent and to know that if it lands on the approach to the green it will get the same reaction as if the ball landed on the green itself.

“And you need rooting for that, which you get from fescue and, indeed, brown top bent grass, but which you can’t get with meadow grass. I don’t care how well it’s prepared, you can’t get proper ball reaction from meadow grass because it doesn’t have the root system to give you that resilience and consistency of reaction when the ball lands.

“With a meadow grass dominated sward the ball will either land soft, make a dent, bounce up and perhaps suck back, or, if it’s hard and dry enough, have no resilience at all and bounce on through the green. A

player sometime doesn’t know what to expect,” explained John, whose passion when he describes such things shines through like a beacon.

“We want to retain more of the residual spin when the ball lands. Greens are not only prepared for smoothness and puttability – but also for how they receive the ball and, from a well struck shot from the perfect lie, we want the ball to bounce twice then, on the third bounce, grip - not spin back, but stop. That’s what we are trying to achieve, but a lot will depend on moisture levels at the time.”

“The guy who is sitting in the perfect lie in the fairway and with the skill to spin the ball should be rewarded, but he won’t be if the green is such that everyone can control the ball all on it from any lie on the course,” said John, who in conjunction with the R&A, has been using the Turf Thumper, a USGA designed-tool, comprising a tube with a ball shaped centre, linked to a computer, which drops on the turf to measure the firmness and resilience of greens and, indeed fairways.

So there you have it. Just a snapshot of the thought and skill which has gone into some of the preparation for this year’s Open venue.

What then happened eight years ago to cause such controversy and produce such negative headlines?

“In the lead up we were aware of the severity of the rough and that some of the fairways were a bit narrow in places, narrower than they will be this year, but following on from a wet year in ‘98, the rough was very severe on many courses on the east coast of Scotland in the lead up to ‘99,” recalled John.

What couldn’t have been foreseen however was the situation which arose on the 6th hole – Hogan’s Alley.

With a strong prevailing headwind the players were frightened of the out of bounds left so were laying up short making it a genuine three shotter. They then couldn’t reach the regular second shot landing area about 60-70 yards short of the green. The second shots were landing in a very narrow area bordered by thick rough about 50 yards in length which was never intended to be a landing area,” explained John.





That area was widened just after The Open and has remained so ever since while the landing area off the tee has been made more inviting, encouraging players to hit driver, with the fairway bunkering amended by Martin Hawtree.

The 3rd hole has also been altered by Martin and the rough on the 17th and 18th holes recontoured. The course is now actually 60 yards longer than in '99, and is the longest on the Open rota at 7421 yards, complete with two par-4 measuring more than 500 yards. It will be no cakewalk.

What disappointed John and his team more than anything in the aftermath of '99 was the fact that the attention was firmly on the penal rough and not on the wonderful condition that the "in play" areas were in.

"The lads were very disappointed because they knew what they'd put into the course and they knew what the playing surfaces were like - the areas the players were meant to be on. This wasn't emphasised, because it wasn't controversial to say that the fairways were firm and the greens were consistently pacey and true," said John, who did say that some players, including Ernie Els, praised them for the course condition, while others, among them Tiger Woods, didn't make any negative comments.

John's opinion on golf course set up and the nature of player power and press coverage, is also equally well argued.

"Rough is a hazard area. If players go into the Barry Burn, as is very common, there is never anything said - players fish out the ball, take a penalty drop and play on. But go into the rough and there is a totally different outlook. 'I'm 150 yards away, 40 yards off line. I should be able to get to the green from here, but this rough is ridiculous.'

"To me the other way is far worse. When a player, 30 yards off line - in the rough, a supposed area of punishment - can hit a 3-iron 220 yards onto the green. No-one says that's nonsense, he shouldn't be able to do that, but the media will say, 'What a fantastic shot. What a player!' But he was 30 yards off line and had the perfect lie!" said John.

"Ok, we obviously accept that we want to progress in golf turf management, presentation and quality, ball reaction, etc but when it comes to hazards on the links, nature prevails."

So what is the definitive answer to that fertilising the rough rumour and how did it get started?

"That came from Greg Norman who had just taken a 7 on the 17th. It was quoted that he was just a couple of feet off the fairway but, in fact, he was through the three metre wide semi rough and in the really thick stuff. What he said in his interview afterwards was that he'd never seen links rough so green.

"Like other courses in this area the rough can colour quite well and it can take quite a bit of dry weather to discolour it. That year it never did turn to semi dormancy and certainly was nothing like Hoylake last year." Having talked about the rough it is perhaps ironic that the lasting memory of the '99 Open is of Jean Van De Velde, shoes and socks off, standing in the Barry Burn as he nightmarishly threw away a certain win.

Jean's thoughts of playing from the Burn seemed ambitious at best but John revealed that Sam Snead successfully extracted himself from a sand bank in the burn during the 1937 Open. This year, though, the wall around the burn is one block higher where Van De Velde dropped in.

It is to be hoped that 2007 brings no more rough justice for Carnoustie but that all the memories it creates revolve around wonderful golf and a fine tuned and well received golf course. They should be.

