



LONDON CLUB ON THE UP AND UP

Scott MacCallum visited the London Club during the busiest week of its year and witnessed a club at the top of its game

Visit the London Golf Club and two things will quickly become apparent. It's not within the sound of Bow Bells - it's actually set in beautiful Kent countryside away from, but within easy reach, of London itself. But, like the city, it's very much a place where it all happens. Put bluntly, it never stops at the London Golf Club, and the greenkeeping team takes whatever is thrown at it in its stride.

Whether it be preparing for eight consecutive days of professional golf in the shape of the London Senior Masters and accompanying pro-ams – with shotgun starts - or ensuring that a half a million pound luxury cruiser is successfully manoeuvred into place in front of the clubhouse, the team makes sure it all happens without a hitch.

Investment has been poured into the Club since it was taken over by Spanish real estate company, the Bendinat Group, four years ago. Before then the Club, originally a Japanese venture, had seen fluctuating fortunes since it was opened in 1993.

However, the future now looks particularly rosy, even more so when you consider that the London Olympics are set to regenerate the east side of London and place much more emphasis on sport.

One of the initiatives reintroduced by the new owners has been the London Seniors Masters which sees the burgeoning European Seniors Tour arrive in town.

“This week is a real test. It takes you right out of your comfort zone,” said Peter Todd, Courses Manager, speaking in the middle of producing tournament playing conditions.

The London Golf Club greenkeeping team of 24 - which is supplemented by additional crew from the likes of The Belfry, The Grove and Tandridge GC - is pushed to its limits, working round the clock and round the players to meet the needs of the event.

“We've been working split shifts to ensure that the other course is maintained for our members use during this week,” explained Peter.

“Shot-gun starts do add to the pressure and the guys work from 5am to 10am and then from 2.30pm to around 7.30pm. Some volunteer to work on the other course from 10am to 2.30pm. In the main it's five hours in the morning and five hours in the afternoon and evening for a ten hour day.”

Most of the cutting is carried out after play has finished each day to fit in with the Tour schedule and as generally it offers drier conditions.

“Continuity during tournament week is important and so key operations are allocated to specific greenstaff in the run-up to the event particularly while stripes are being 'burnt in'. If we had two people of different heights cutting fairways for example, their sight lines would be slightly different and we'd have inconsistency of stripe.” explained Peter.

With regard to keeping a course at its best, peaked, for the week, nothing is left to chance.

“We are constantly aware of, and monitoring, stress levels, rainfall patterns and maintenance regimes to make fine adjustments. For example, the other evening five mil of rain fell so we altered the mowers to get the accuracy we were looking for. Our normal practice is spot watering with virtually no overhead irrigation during the tournament on greens surfaces,” said Peter, adding that praise on course condition from the likes of Sam Torrance, who eventually won the event, make it all the more satisfying.

Set in more than 700 acres of Kent countryside, the Club has two courses; the Jack Nicklaus-designed Heritage and its sister course, the International. The work makes mammoth and varied demands on Peter's time; an example being the enormous task of relining eight lakes.

“It trips off the tongue but the logistics were huge. It was a £1 million project. The lakes are all interlinked, stretching the length of the estate, and are a part of the Club’s extremely elaborate in-house water recycling scheme.”

All the run-off water, including the grey water from the clubhouse, flows into the system and is used as irrigation water – around 80% of the irrigation supply is recycled, which meant that last year’s drought had very little impact on the club.

The scale of the projects that the team undertake are also shown in the up keep of eleven miles of cart paths and extensive new tree plantations – a result of a £10,000 annual spend on a tree and gorse programme. On top of that, there is the detailed planting around the clubhouse, which is looked after by a full time horticulturalist, who ensures that every plant is labelled so that members and visitors can enjoy them to the full.

“We always look at ways of bringing ourselves up to date with equipment and feel it’s vital to continually review our maintenance practices” explained Peter. For example, a Toro Sidewinder is used for cutting most slopes now rather than a Flymo.

Since the Bendinat Group took over the aim has been to run operations from the head and not the heart, with profit being the name of the game.

“Profitable golf stems from sustainable golf. We have to meet the needs of our customers while at the same time minimising inputs of water and fertiliser – not only for ecological reasons but for the technical and cost benefits.

“By only applying minimal quantities and by always using information and the latest technology – for example regularly measuring evaporation, tissue analysis, soil temperatures and more – we can make quick informed decisions about fertiliser programmes using foliar sprays. It can be slightly more labour intensive but it allows us to fine-tune applications and minimise both quantities and cost at the same time as meeting turf needs” said Peter.

The injection of funds has also allowed the greenkeeping department to re-equip itself with all the latest machinery from mowers and tractors to workshop grinders. More than just a “shopping expedition” this was an opportunity to address the Club’s equipment schedule and create a greenkeeping inventory in accordance with the desire to maximise efficiencies, not only on the course but from a maintenance perspective as well. Through careful selection and identifying areas of work which can be contracted out, it has enabled the department to make a 10% reduction in the size of its fleet.

The ever-changing face of greenkeeping continually presents fresh challenges – gone are the days when the Club sought to be totally self-sufficient. Now large scale operations, such as fairway coring, tree planting and over-seeding across the courses are outsourced, leaving the staff time to focus on the fine turf areas.

The experience that the London Golf Club greenkeepers acquire stands them in good stead and former employees have secured positions at some of the world’s top golfing venues including The Belfry, Loch Lomond, The K Club and Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand.

The fact that the London Golf Club exists at all may well, be down to one of this country’s most famous political husband and wife. The tale goes that Mrs Thatcher was on a trade mission to Japan and was approached by some Japanese business men who wanted to build the best golf course in the world. Legend has it that Mrs Thatcher told them that she had a country to run but that they’d better speak to golf-loving Dennis. He





Bunker work can be labour intensive



Peter Todd



Looking good!



Top quality presentation

persuaded them to build the club in this country and ultimately Dennis became Club President.

It goes without saying that golf is big business nowadays and if confirmation of this were required, you need look no further than the London Golf Club marketing team who admit to taking the lead from their greenkeeping colleagues.

“Green fees have risen from £45 to more than £100 in the last three years, testament to the high standards set at the club through the combined efforts of a young, go-ahead team where everyone has the authority to pitch in with ideas,” said Marketing and Sales Director Heath Harvey.

Having achieved so much in such a short time in turning the Club in a new direction, the ultimate aim now is to secure a regular European Tour event. The odds are already looking good and with the drive and enthusiasm of everyone at the London Golf Club you certainly wouldn't bet against it!

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