

Horses (and Tennis) for Courses



Mark Harvey and Dave Langheim have their busiest time of the year now, and not because of golf. **Scott MacCallum** visited them just before it all kicked off



June sees two of the world's great sporting events take place within 12 miles of each other in and around London, but while The Derby will see visitors casting their eyes over expensive thoroughbreds and Wimbledon has tennis supporters willing Andy Murray to become the first British men's single's Champion since Fred Perry, two people will spend their time, eyes skywards, praying for sunny, dry weather.

Mark Harvey, Head Greenkeeper at Epsom Golf Club, and Dave Langheim, Course Manager at

Wimbledon Park Golf Club, both see their golf courses play a huge role in these two iconic sporting occasions.

The two courses are each no more than a road's width away from Epsom Downs and The All England Club respectively and are closed for the duration of the events to become home to car parks, hospitality facilities, police compounds and, until this year, a fully fledged fun fair. As you might imagine they do leave the odd blemish to the turf.

"The Derby, which is always run on the first Saturday in June, affects at least 10 of our holes and means our course is closed for two

days," said Mark, who maintains Epsom with a staff of four including himself.

"Some of the lesser race meetings, and we have around 13 race days a year, cause the closure or certain holes for an afternoon," he added.

It does lead to the odd occasion when race day visitors have driven to the course but enjoyed themselves a little too much and taken a taxi home.

"On occasion we have cars left on the course which are collected the following morning. They drive off a little embarrassed when they realise the car park is also a golf course."

MAIN: Epsom Downs Racecourse on the horizon of Epsom Golf Club

INSET FAR LEFT: Bird's eye view of the golf course, showing parked cars and the fairground



Mark, who has been at the club for 18 years, tries to keep his fairways as fertile as possible in the run up to the The Derby and prays that it stays dry, often in vain.

This year for the first time the traditional fun fair won't be on the golf course but in the past Mark has always found the fair people very good to work with.

"Many of them have come for years and we know them well so when it's been wet and they haven't had anywhere to head off to we were quite happy for them to stay put for a couple of days until things dried out."

The greens are all fenced off and the police put down trackway for their compound, but Mark still has quite a bit of damage to put right when he gets his golf course back again.

Once the new Derby winner has been anointed and is relishing the

rest of his life at stud, Mark and an official from the racecourse will carry out a full inspection to see what damage has been done.

"We have a good relationship and the Racecourse do, when requested, send assistance to help with the clear-up. Among the damage that The Derby generates is, obviously, compaction, diesel spills, grass dying off under the metal roadways that are installed, irrigation pipes being holed by fence posts while loose nuts, bolts, nails and screws turn up for a long time after.

"Cylinder mowers are a big no-no for a while afterwards and on one hole, the 9th, we play preferred lies through the green," said Mark, who also said that he lost some rough on one hole near the racecourse as it was mown short to allow more car parking.

However, there is an upside to having to close in the height of the

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season as the course benefits from no play for a short while.

While the course is out of commission Mark and his team can work on his fenced off greens. Hollow coring, solid tining and overseeding in June gives some superb results and Mark is rightly proud of the quality of his greens.

"I don't think you would find many greens, on an inland course in this country, with the amount of bent and fescue grasses we have," he said.

Epsom members join knowing that The Derby has a big impact on the Club. All the main competitions – annual pro-am, Captain's Day etc - are held prior to June. The Club members are happy to know that they play a part in what is the most famous horse race in the world.

Mark, who admits to no interest in racing and a dislike of horses, is pleased to look after a club with

ABOVE: Views of Epsom Downs; and Mark Harvey, Head Greenkeeper at Epsom Golf Club, pictured near the damaged turf on the course



such a famous name and cope with whatever it throws at him.

Epsom is still getting itself back to normal when, two weeks later, Wimbledon swings into action and Dave Langheim sees his lovely 5,500 yard Wimbledon Park course - which is laid out around the Capability Brown-designed Wimbledon Lake - transformed.

"We have something in the region of 10-12,000 cars parked on the course during the Championships, with a public car park on the back nine and the members and players' guest car parks on the other side of the course along with the hospitality units, Sky, CNN and Capital Radio. The 12th and 13th holes are left empty as evacuation points for everyone at the tennis in the event of an emergency," explained Dave, who took over as Course Manager just before last year's Championships.

Preparations start as early as April when Dave meets with the All England Club and the AA, who do all the fencing and roping off of the course, to discuss preparations then, two weeks before the start, the framework for all the tents are brought in across the fairways over a portable roadway.

"At this stage we are still open for play and the security guards monitor the golf and control the traffic, including the 40 tonne trucks," said Dave.

"The week before the start of the Championships is when everything really happens and the golf course comes to a very slow halt. We shut down on the weekend before the Monday start and reopen the weekend after the tennis finishes. Basically it takes two weeks to set up and one week to break down," he explained.

Like Epsom, Dave, and his team of eight guys and a mechanic, make the most of the non-golf time.

"We are very busy during the three weeks. We sand Graden all greens and tees, it's a fantastic time to do it. I use Richard Gooding and his team from Machines Direct. This year we will be using the seed attachment to the Graden, we use 60 tonnes of 35mm sand that is dry kilned. While this is taking place during the first week of the Championships M J Abbotts will be here to redesign and Sportscrete the bunkers on the 17th. We have plans to Sportscrete all the bunkers in the future," revealed Dave.

The work is made easier for the Wimbledon team because, for security reasons, every car must be taken off the course at the end of each day. This allows them to keep on top of some of the cutting, although with the car parks open at 6.30am each day, and visitors keen to take advantage of the tickets that



MAIN ABOVE: The new Centre Court looms over the golf course
INSET ABOVE: The tracks can be seen all year round
BELOW: The golf course is immaculately maintained





“The Wimbledon factor doesn’t give the club license to spend money recklessly”

ment being played at Wimbledon, it will see the course closed twice within a few months and all the work doubled!

The All England Club ensures that Wimbledon Park Golf Club is recompensed for the use of the facilities each year, which ensures that the contents of Dave’s Maintenance Facility would do justice to some much larger golf clubs.

“The Wimbledon factor doesn’t give the club license to spend money recklessly, each department has a strict budget, but we do know we can make plans for the golf club and be confident that they will happen. For instance the five year plan includes a new irrigation system and fairway drainage improvements,” said Dave, who added that he is working closely with the local council to improve the water quality in the lake with the long term aim of using the top three inches for irrigation.

Don’t go worrying about the Wimbledon Park members and their lack of golf in June and July – they don’t miss out for the three weeks that their course is out of commission.

“There is an open evening at the club and members are invited to choose where they wish to play from a list of clubs which includes the likes of Hankley Common, Coombe

ABOVE: Wimbledon Fortnight transforms Wimbledon Park Golf Club

INSET LEFT: The Greenkeeping Team with Dave Langheim back right

are available to the public, are not slow to arrive. The often televised lines of queuing tennis fans snake along two of the holes.

Compaction is again one of the biggest problems and it is not unknown for the large articulated lorries to get stuck if they fall off the trackway.

“The only damage we had last year was to some of our irrigation boxes when a 40 tonner decided to drive over them and we always have grass dying off underneath the trackway. When they go that

turf is shredded off and relaid,” said Dave.

On the Monday and Tuesday after the Championships the All England Club provides 30 to 40 people to assist with the clear up while Wimbledon Park uses contractors to do the restoration work.

“We use Golf Links, who have done our work for a number of years. Basically I order the turf and the Rootzone and get everything ready for them when Dave Walker and his guys arrive,” said Dave, who is waiting for 2012 when, with the Olympic Games tennis tourna-



Hill, Walton Heath and Effingham. They can play up to six times on these courses over the three week period and it's all covered as part of their membership of Wimbledon Park," explained Dave.

As Course Manager Dave has a security pass to the Championships and thoroughly enjoys his involvement during the fortnight.

"I love it. The buzz here is fantastic with the hospitality guests being chauffeured back and forward to the Centre Court in Club Cars that look like Rolls Royces, Johnny Vaughan and Denise Van Outen did their Capital Radio shows from a bus on one of the fairways, we also cut a tennis court out on one of our tees for Tim Henman and Amanda Holden to do a Robinson promotion. It is all going on.

"People don't realise that they are on a golf course and what a lovely golf course it is," he said.

Both Dave and Mark have high points in their year that don't involve golf but in their own way, and with the levels of resource they have available to them, they ensure that their courses are at their best for their members.

When you watch The Derby and Wimbledon this year have a thought for the work that two fine greenkeeping teams have done, and continue to do.

ABOVE and BELOW RIGHT: Wimbledon Park Golf Club in it's healthier state

RIGHT: More damage from tracks



"Johnny Vaughan and Denise Van Outen did their Capital Radio shows from a bus on one of the fairways!"

