



Golf is coming home

Scott MacCallum catches up with two Gordons who are working hard to ensure that this month's Open is played on the perfect stage





Photography courtesy of St Andrews Links Trust

There is something about an Open played over the Old Course.

I've been to six, and seen some remarkable golf.

Back in 1978 I saw Jack Nicklaus finally overhaul New Zealander, Simon Owen, in the home straight; in '84, I peered over the wall at the 17th as Tom Watson stumbled and allowed Seve, complete with his iconic 18th hole celebration, to snatch victory; in '90, Nick Faldo was in his pomp and crushed Greg Norman, and the rest of the field; five years later, John Daly showed what a fine golfer he can be, and he didn't wobble as Costantino Rocca holed an amazing Valley of Sin putt on the 72nd green to force a play-

off; in 2000 Tiger Woods became the youngest player to complete the set of Majors, leaving the rest in his wake, and five years later he again showed his mastery of the Old Course.

Six Opens, each memorable and each identifying the cream of that particular era's crop.

But I'm only scratching the surface of Opens that I've been lucky enough to attend. Before my time memorable things were happening every time The Open was played on my own back yard, with legendary names such as JH Taylor, James Braid, Bobby Jones, Sam Snead, Peter Thomson and Bobby Locke all emerging triumphant.

As a greenkeeper there can be no greater privilege than to prepare the Old Course for an Open Championship and this year that honour falls

to Gordon McKie, who will be experiencing his first Open as Course Manager.

"I remember doing an Assistant Profile for Greenkeeper International about 12 years ago and the final question was 'What do you hope to be doing in 10 years time?' I said that I wanted to be a Head Greenkeeper or Course Manager at a top course, but this has exceeded all expectations and it's a real dream to be in charge for an Open at the best known course in the world," said Gordon, who arrived at St Andrews Links from Tain and spent a number of years working on other courses within the Links stable before becoming Old Course Course Manager three years ago.

Gordon works very closely with another Gordon, Gordon Moir, who is the St Andrews Links Trust's



new back tee that has been built for the 17th – a change to the most famous and challenging hole in all of golf.

“It was our idea, back in 2005,” revealed Gordon Moir.

“We had our usual de-brief after that Open, looking at what went well, could have done better and what we might do for future Opens. The main criticism in ‘05 was the penal rough on the right of 17 meaning most players were only hitting a 3 or 4 iron off the tee and I suggested, ‘How about we put a new tee back here and leave the rough on the right cut as semi’. It wasn’t taken up then, but I kept mentioning it and eventually Peter Dawson (R&A Chief Executive) said he was warming to the idea.

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Director of Greenkeeping.

“I’m more involved with meetings with the R&A and working with the grandstand and scoreboard erecting teams leaving Gordon to get on with looking after the golf course. I’ve also got our other six courses to oversee as well,” said Gordon Moir, who, like Gordon McKie has risen up through the ranks at the Trust having arrived in Fife from the north-east of Scotland.

It doesn’t take a crystal ball to predict that one of the main talking points at this year’s Open will be the

it in the winter of ‘08 but it had to go through the committee process, while a couple of players were asked about it at the Dunhill Links Championship last year. When they gave their approval to the idea we got the go ahead and it was built last winter,” said Gordon Moir, who believes it will be the preferred tee unless there is a strong easterly wind.

Other course amendments, introduced since 2005 are less high profile but will have just as big an impact on how the course is played.

“We’ve made some changes to the

surrounds, cutting closer further away from the greens so the ball will roll off more easily and further away meaning some bunkers, which were previously in the rough, are now in closely mown areas so that the ball will run into them more easily,” said Gordon McKie, who is believed to be the first Course Manager to have his own Open Blog, which he hopes to continue through the week of the Championship itself - www.standrews.org.uk/2010-Open/Blog.aspx

Another area where changes have



10. What do you hope to be doing in 10 years time?
 Head Greenkeeper or Course Manager at a top course

been made is the 4th hole which had previously involved a blind tee shot over gorse.

"They complained about the 4th in '05," explained Gordon Moir.

"We built a new back tee last time and it was 295 yards to the ridge beyond which the fairway opens up. But only 10% of the field could carry it, so 90% of the field were complaining as they didn't want to go down the narrow strip of fairway on the right because of the two bunkers in that area, even though the carry on that line is only 200 yards."

Gordon McKie added that the fairway short of the ridge had been widened and gorse removed from the mound in front of the tee and replaced with wispy fescue so that players could see the ball land.

"We've also worked on the bunker face angles to increase playability and make them a little fairer."

Since taking over the Old Course Gordon McKie has looked to work on course conditioning and has done a considerable amount of overseeding as well as slightly increasing the feed and water.

"I've overseeded all the greens with pure fescue six times in each of the last two years, and twice this year, which we can do because the greens

"When I arrived in 1991 we'd just started a policy of boxing off the clippings on the fairways and it was great because it really firmed up the fairways and got rid of the worm casts," recalled Gordon Moir, who added that the fairways were actually running faster than the greens at the '05 Open.

"But we got to the stage having done that for 15 years that we were putting nothing back into the fairways by way of nutrient and they were starting to look tired – they weren't even getting the clippings going back into them – so in consultation with Richard Windows, of the STRI, we decided to add a tiny amount of fertiliser," said Gordon McKie.

That policy reaped dividends at the turn of this year when the course was buried under ice for 30 days and the courses were closed for a month.

"I did start to perspire when Peter Dawson phoned and said he recalled Gleneagles losing all their greens in similar circumstances about 30 years ago but we took a lot of advice, including posting on the BIGGA website, and the best came from a guy who looked after Boat of Garten Golf Club whom I knew. He said that he had iced greens year in year out

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Gordon McKie

are so big and we can do part of them at a time," he said.

"I take on board the policy that we should manage a course with minimal fertiliser and minimal water but, at the end of the day, it needs something. My philosophy is that you look after grass the way you look after the human body and we all need food and water... as long as we get the correct amount we'll be fit and healthy.

"What we do is still very minimal. When I took over the nitrogen input was about 27 kg/Ha a year and we're just sitting on about 30 kg/Ha," said Gordon McKie, who used to be a regular on the BIGGA Open Support Team and was the man with the dramatic Jean Van de Velde match at Carnoustie in 1999.

The fairways now had around 10 kg/Ha of nitrogen on them in three of the past four years just to keep them healthy following on from a policy introduced at St Andrews around 20 years ago.

and the best thing to do was to let nature take its course," explained Gordon McKie, who added that an experiment in aerating through the ice conducted on one of the other courses confirmed the waiting was the best approach.

When the thaw arrived it showed that the fescue and bent had coped well and that a couple of greens on one of the other courses, which had a higher poa content, had suffered to a greater degree.

"It was a great advert for sustainable golf showing that if you have the right sort of grasses you will survive in these extreme (for the UK) conditions," said Gordon McKie.

This year Richard Windows, and a team from the STRI, will be on course every day producing performance management data on soil moisture, green speeds etc on behalf of the R&A.

"In the middle of each day we will look at this data and use it to base our decisions on whether we need



to give it an extra cut or irrigate a particular green a little more. It is getting much more scientific and we are guinea pigs for this as, if successful, it will be rolled out over the other Open venues. It's all about consistency and the playability of the golf course. It really is quite exciting," said Gordon McKie.

The Old Course, which has always closed every Sunday for a full day's maintenance, closed permanently until the Championship on June 19 to enable Gordon and his team to make the final presentational touches but, speaking a month and a half out both Gordons were extremely relaxed about where they were, especially as a couple of weeks of good weather had brought the course on a lot.

St Andrews is unique in that they have an extended team of greenkeepers, which may be unmatched in the world of golf with seven courses worth of experience and talent available to draw on for The Open.





“The regular team is 15 strong – large because of the sheer size of the greens on the Old Course where the six people who hand cut the greens each day each walk seven miles (the shared 5th and 13th green is over half a hectare) – and I can draw on knowledge of four other Course Managers as well as Gordon, who was a working greenkeeper, and so many others. There are guys on our team who have done seven Opens. The senior guys on my team, deputy, Jon Wood, and my three senior men, together with me have well over 100 years of experience,” said Gordon McKie, who has already booked a holiday and four days in his bed from the Tuesday after the Championship is over.

He will have around 65-70 greenkeepers working on the course during Open week with ten cutting greens.

“We are on the fourth or fifth draft of work schedules but I think one of the main issues, with such

a big team, will be to keep everyone happy during the week. The younger guys are beginning to get excited and it’s down to the senior guys to keep their feet on the ground,” said Gordon McKie, who added that it was very much a team effort and that the guys deserve all the plaudits that they get.

“It will be proud moment for me and all of my family when I’m standing beside the Champion at the presentation on the Sunday evening,” he added.

Playing a small part in the Old Course’s fabled history is a priceless honour and both Gordons are delighted to have assisted in producing what will undoubtedly be another worthy St Andrews Champion.

As for me, I’m sure I will also add another chapter to my own St Andrews Open memories.

