



How the Ryder Cup was won

Celtic Manor's Jim McKenzie talks exclusively with Scott MacCallum about the finest greenkeeping achievement of modern times

Jim McKenzie was in the middle of the worst day of his professional life. It was Sunday morning and The Ryder Cup, the event he'd been dreaming about and praying for since 1996, was in the middle of its second long rain delay.

Play wasn't going to finish that day and there was a prospect of the match not going the full distance for the first time in its illustrious history.

"I was in need of a lift so went down to the hotel and had a chat with Debbie, my wife, which cheered me up a bit and on the way back I came out of the lift and bumped into Colin Montgomerie. He said, 'Come with me,' and we sat in a corner and had a coffee," revealed Jim.

"Colin said, 'The bottom line is this. We're currently two points down and if we don't play today all the matches out there will be declared halved, and we're up on all six of them at the moment. If that happens we'll go into the Singles still two points down and we're not traditionally strong in the Singles. If we can get all the matches completed this afternoon it gives us a chance,'" recalled Jim.

With that message ringing in his ears Jim returned to his men – 65 of his own Celtic Manor staff and 71 volunteer greenkeepers – and urged them to lift their tired bodies once again for yet another monumental effort.

"I told them that I'd just spoken to Colin and that he's asked that if there was any way we could get play going we could go down in history as the first greenkeeping crew to help win the Ryder Cup,"

And that is exactly what happened. The crew worked tirelessly to make the saturated course playable for an afternoon start and the players did their bit by turning their overnight leads into five and a half points out of six.

"If we hadn't pulled it off on Sunday we would have gone into the Singles two points down and we

ing event in the world and no stone had been left unturned in ensuring a successful Cup.

However, the pressures on the worldwide golfing calendar had pushed the match into October for only the second time in its history and the South Wales weather can be notoriously fickle. And so it was.

"We had 55% of our monthly rainfall in two days – about two inches," said Jim, who did say that a Wales Open of a few years ago had endured three inches of rain and finished within half an hour of its scheduled time.

"Colin asked if there was any way we could get play going, we could go down in history as the first greenkeeping crew to help win the Ryder Cup"

Jim McKenzie

would probably have got no more than nine points, instead of the magic 14.5.

"The shift that the guys put in on that Sunday afternoon, and the Saturday night before, was absolutely astonishing – outrageous! And that Sunday afternoon turned out to be the greatest day in the history of European golf," said Jim, who is not one given to hyperbole.

Weather conditions were always the one nagging doubt about the 2010 Ryder Cup. The venue was custom built to cope with the demands of the third biggest sport-

Ironically, if the match had been played a week before or a week after there wouldn't have been any problems at all as the weather was just fine.

"When the volunteers arrived on the Saturday before the course was looking better than it had ever done," he recalled.

"However, we had 13 mil during Wednesday practice and could see things getting worse, but on Thursday we got fresh information from the on-site meteorologist that it wasn't just going to be wet on Friday it was going to be appallingly wet."

The European Tour had invited Gerry Byrne, Superintendent at the K Club, venue for the 2006 match, as well as Scott Fenwick, Superintendent at Gleneagles, venue for the 2014 match, as guests and, earlier in the week, Gerry had offered his successor one piece of advice.

"Gerry said that he didn't think we had enough chip bark in stock. I said, surely not we've got loads here, but Gerry was right and on Thursday night I was getting lorry loads brought in - £25,000 worth, thanks to Inscapes, the Bridgend-based contractor, who managed to source it from all over the place."

That night was probably the first time that the 130 strong army of green staff discovered what the week was to have in store for them.

"The work that the boys put in on the Friday had to be seen to be believed. Sir Terry Matthews actually came down to tell the guys that they had probably saved the Ryder Cup, and I told them that they had put the matches back on track."

Jim McKenzie

"We were up all Thursday night managing the arrival of the lorries. It wasn't quite the start to the Ryder Cup that I'd envisaged. I'd always pictured myself standing of the 1st tee for the first game," said Jim, who is now the only man in history to have managed a course for a Monday finish of a Ryder Cup.

"The work that the boys put in on the Friday had to be seen to be believed. Sir Terry Matthews actually came down to tell the guys that they had probably saved the Ryder Cup, and I told them that they had put the matches back on track."

"Blow me, if it wasn't to get worse on that Sunday!"

A month beforehand Jim was actually concerned that he'd dragooned too many volunteers and that he might struggle to find sufficient work to keep them occupied.

"We then had a night of really

bad rainfall which demolished a lot of the bunkers and I realised that I didn't have too many after all. As it turned out I couldn't have survived with even one fewer."

With multi tee starts at various times during the week deploying resources was not straightforward and Jim split his crew into 10 smaller teams who attacked the course quickly and efficiently all at the same time - each armed with squeegees, roller mops, pumps and bunker rakes.

All this time other crew members, including Jim's son, 14 year-old Elliott, and wife, Debbie, were out throwing chip bark and pushing water off fairways.

The galleries had not been allowed on to the site on the Sunday morning, some staying in their cars from 6am to noon,

to allow the clear-up work to take place.

"When they were on site they were using the cart paths which meant that we couldn't get around the site," explained Jim.

The delayed Monday finish meant those volunteer crew members with flights booked, work or family commitments had to leave, although amazingly around 55 of the 71 were able to extend their stay.

"Those who had to go were gutted to have missed Monday, and I was gutted for them, but everyone rallied round. Complete Weed Control, as a prime example. Alan Abel, one of the franchise owners in the area, cancelled all his work on the Monday and brought his staff in and they worked with the gardeners and threw on chip bark for us early in the morning," said Jim, who saw fog delay the start of the Monday for five minutes.

"I was wondering what was coming next - snow!"

The volunteers had come from far and wide and drawn from a 300 strong list of applicants.

"They were from Spain, Denmark, Switzerland, America, Holland, as well as the home nations and a significant proportion from the local area. They were all easy to motivate because they all wanted to be there. I've had emails from many of them saying that it was the greatest week of their lives."

Those who watched Jim closely during the week commented on how calm and assured he was during what was undoubtedly the most stress filled period of his life.

"There were places I could go when I was a bit down or when I wanted to punch the wall, but

there were a lot of people who were a calming influence, Guys like Billy McMillan, Russell Anderson, Angus McLeod, Robert Johnstone and Steve Chappell, the South Wales Section Secretary, who was superb. He actually organised 10 caravans for the crew and provided them complete with rooming lists, which was such a help to Nicola, who was handling our administration."

Another great source of support was Chris Kennedy, and his partner, Jill.

"Chris is the most experienced tournament host in our industry and his contribution in terms of encouragement and how to deal with the politics associated with situations like this was invaluable and could not have come from anybody else."

So having missed the opening tee shots on the Friday how much of the Ryder Cup did Jim actually witness live?

Ryder Cup Memories

"The extreme weather would test the best. What a team effort from everyone involved everyone pulled together it's not the golf I will remember but the team preparing the venue because they proved that anything and everything is possible. Well done Jim and his team you were amazing."
Billy McMillan

"Sunday, pouring with rain, message from Monty - "If the fourballs and foursomes don't get finished Europe would go into the singles two points down, so not pressure at all! The team worked brilliantly, pulled together by the atrocious weather; it would not have been played without the fantastic efforts of dedicated greenkeepers."
Chris Sealey

By day and night: The team of greenkeepers work through the night, and below, the same hole in the day...

BOTTOM: A team briefing

"I saw three shots all week and two of them were putts," he laughed, adding that he had watched Graeme McDowell's heroics on the 16th and attempted to get to the 17th only be thwarted by the massive galleries.

Instead he headed for the 18th green to join in the celebrations where he got news he'd been waiting for.

"I was told that there was room in the seating area of the Closing Ceremony for us all which was amazing.

"As we walked to the seating area from the 18th green there must have been 20,000 people all cheering and clapping the crew. There were young greenkeepers in tears. Then when we were taken into the closing ceremony we were given a standing ovation. It was an absolutely extraordinary moment for our industry," said Jim, who added that a fulsome tribute was also paid to the team

by Colin Montgomerie during the ceremony.

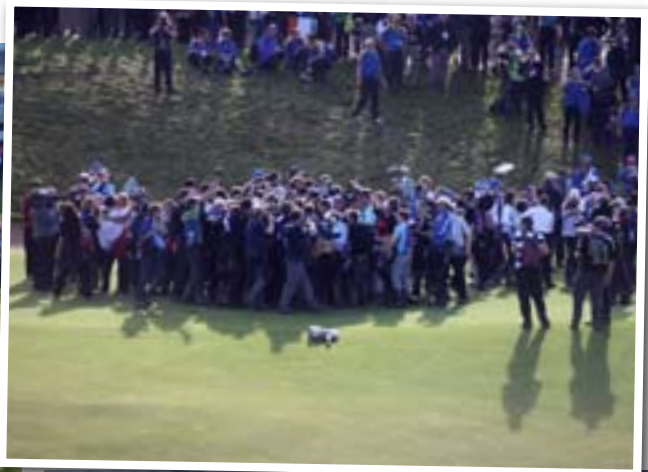
If the greenkeeping crew drew justified accolades, so did the 2010 golf course for handling everything that was thrown at it.

"I've been assessing the damage and everything inside the ropes, tees, fairways, greens is bone dry. We're really pleased with it. Even the spectator crossing points are absolutely fine, not a mark on them, which is testament to all the top dressing, drainage and sand bagging that we've done.

"But, it's the areas outside of the ropes which had taken the hit. We had a third of a million people walking on it over six days and it just acted like a big rotovator. I must admit, I've never seen anything like it.

"The police gave me a framed photograph taken from a helicopter on Friday and it looks like a desert course. Just stripes of green and everything else mud."





With the course scheduled to host the Wales Open in May, next year and the last of the structures not due to leave site until December 6 time is tight and although the Roman Road Course, has hosted the Wales Open before and could do so again, there is pressure for the 2010 course to put its best foot forward again.

“It’s going to be a combination of seeding, turfing, harrowing and rolling. No rest for the wicked, I’m afraid.”

So, a week on from that famous Monday, what were Jim’s reflections?

“The greatest highs and the greatest lows of my entire life, all in the space of four days. Friday morning and Sunday morning were extraordinary lows, and Monday afternoon, when it was all over and the guys were getting that ovation, was the greatest high of my career.”

He also had nothing but praise for his crew.

“They were working from 5am to 8pm a lot of the time in the cold and wet. We tried to keep them warm and we fed them well, but there was a lot of down time waiting for the rain to stop. It was actually very humbling to watch.”

And how close did the Ryder Cup come to not finishing with all 28 points accounted for and, possibly, a different result?

“Probably a couple of hours, possibly just an hour, because if we’d started any later on the Sunday we wouldn’t have had Saturday completed and if we hadn’t finished there was no guarantee that we would have finished on Monday.”

A lot has been written and a lot has been said about the 2010 Ryder Cup at Celtic Manor Resort but no man, outside of Captains and players, experienced it in quite the same way as Jim McKenzie.

Ryder Cup Memories

“Jim McKenzie being followed down the 18th by his 140 greenkeepers. It was at the start of the Closing Ceremony. Jim appeared and the greenkeepers saw him and joined the procession. We were escorted into the VIP area. We were all being cheered by the enormous crowd who recognised that we were the greensstaff. The noise was incredible and will live with me forever.”

Angus Macleod

“Watching the final putt on 17 from behind the crowd on the big screen, turning to walk back to the sheds and spotting Jim (McKenzie) doing his impersonation of Ski Sunday, sliding down the viewing bank to the left, and then walking with him down 18. Watching the weight of the golf world lift off his shoulders was superb.”

Colin Webber



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ryder cup crowds follow the action; photographers surround the winner; sky view, and three course pics showing the state of the course after the tournament

