



Going that *extra* mile

In the aftermath of the Ryder Cup, Celtic Manor bore the scars from thousands of rain-soaked people conveying around roped-off sections during those tense final days. Jim Cook spoke with Director of Golf Courses and Estates Management, Jim McKenzie, about the tremendous efforts which have gone into restoring the damaged areas in time for the forthcoming Wales Open in June.



When the Ryder Cup circus moved into Celtic Manor in September last year a 'golf town' was effectively constructed.

It had its own traffic system, its own shops and places to eat and with 50,000 people on site each day, more inhabitants than most towns and villages in the surrounding area.



Inevitably this, combined with heavy rainfall, took its toll on the site. Back in the November issue of *Greenkeeper International*, Jim McKenzie said from an aerial shot taken after the tournament, it resembled a desert course, with islands of green surrounded by mud.

Whereas there was no damage to the actual course itself, on the other side of the ropes where the crowds were, was a different story.

Jim said: "A third of a million people walked through within the space of six days and it acted like a huge rotovator. Off the course, along the rope lines, we had significant grass cover that was lost. Alongside this, it took months for all of the infrastructure to be removed so by the time it was gone, a lot of it had been up for four or five months, so the areas beneath the tents and temporary facilities

were pretty much dead as well. So the damage was to spectator areas, hospitality areas, merchandising areas and places like that and was very significant.”

The last piece of physical structure related to the Ryder Cup, a skip used for the final clear up, was only removed on January 6. Jim mentioned this would have been sooner, though, had it not been for the inclement weather and snow towards the end of last year.

Celtic Manor is due to host the Wales Open at the beginning of June and with this prospect at the forefront of his mind, Jim implemented an expeditious recovery programme to bring the damaged areas of the course back up to pre-Ryder Cup conditions.

“The week after the Ryder Cup we split the course into three areas and started turfing the areas that we felt either needed to get back into shape very quickly or were fundamental for the Wales Open. Then there were other areas where we seeded that weren’t close to play



“A lot of the turf has been laid in huge, wide rolls that rely on specialist equipment to roll it so we’ve brought in local, Bridgend-based contractor, Inscapes”
Jim McKenzie

and that were going to take a while to recover, bearing in mind we were almost in October by then though. Then there were parts that we felt would recover naturally.”

The extensive renovation work required since the tournament would have been a full-time venture for his team of staff at the best of times, but with the unreliable weather and the Wales Open looming, not to mention regular daily maintenance of the course, contractors were brought in to assist.

“We brought contractors in order to get the job done as quickly as we can. A lot of the turf has been laid in huge, wide rolls that rely on specialist equipment to roll it so we’ve brought in local, Bridgend-based contractor, Inscapes, to do that work. Plus our guys have got other things to do.

“We have our winter maintenance schedule to take of so if we had laid all of the turf, and been responsible



for all of the restorations, we just wouldn’t have got it all done.”

One of the worst affected areas was the driving range, where the tented village had stood.

“We are still turfing the driving range at present. There’s something like £35,000 worth of turf going on it, because that was the site of the tented village during the Ryder Cup and it got absolutely hammered. With the Wales Open going on here at the start of June there is not a lot of recovery time, so that area has to be turfed. Basically we went in, scraped the mud and dead grass off and set new turf down. We used the local contractors for a lot of the turf-

ing, and our own staff have done a significant amount as well.”

To give an idea of scale Jim said how, overall, enough turf has been put down to turf the Millennium Stadium pitch four times over.

With the best part of three-and-a-half to four weeks of snow split into three different periods of time at the end of last year, the weather has not helped the recovery programme.

Jim admitted that in preparing a course for two high-profile tournaments in relatively quick succession comes a certain degree of pressure.

He said: “The expectation from the members and guests is very high because the course has held

the Ryder Cup and multiple other tournaments. Also the fact that the Wales Open is in June adds a huge amount of pressure to us, since we'll only have a matter of weeks of good weather between the end of spring and the start of the Wales Open week.

"So we have pressure both from a tournament point of view and from a customer and business point of view. We have it from all angles really."

Last year, the Wales Open was broadcast live to over 300 million households worldwide and with this year sure to be no different means the world will be watching Wales once again.

"A lot of the players who played in the Ryder Cup will be at the Wales Open, so the television pictures and the feedback from the players needs to be good. We can't get it wrong," Jim said.

With this in mind and spring just around the corner, efforts to get the damaged areas back to their best were well on their way.

"The site is getting back into shape. We've had no complaints from any of the visitors because the course itself is fine. The damage was restricted to the areas behind the ropes, because the players who played in the Ryder Cup didn't do any damage at all."

"The actual playing of the golf course is fine and always has been, but it's the extremities to the left and right of holes, the hospitality and catering areas. In some instances on the same hole multiple tasks have been carried out. Some bits have been seeded, some turfed, and some will come back on their own so every hole is different."

Reflecting on the Ryder Cup, Jim stressed the efforts of everybody involved in going that extra mile during the week.

"It was not just us, but everybody involved who put in that extra bit. The marshals, referees, people who drove the buses, manned the car parks, right across the board. There were a lot of people who went that extra mile in order to make sure the event took place. Colin Montgomerie said in his closing speech that the world was watching and Wales delivered. It wasn't just us but the whole combined efforts."

It was the greenkeeping team, however, which has since been singled out for an award.

"We have subsequently learned that since the Ryder Cup that the greenkeepers who worked on the tournament have been given an award from the City of Newport to recognise the efforts. It's for my staff



and also the volunteers from other courses.

"It's an award called the Extra Mile Award which is presented to people that go the extra mile to put the city on the map, so we've won that for our efforts."

The Extra Mile Awards was introduced last year and is an initiative run by Newport City Council and the South Wales Argus newspaper, where individuals or organisations are nominated for going that extra distance.

Jim explained part of the motivation for the achievement.

"It wasn't the most enjoyable week I have ever had but it has certainly turned out to be the most satisfying. Irrespective of how many days it took to play the Ryder Cup, the most important thing was that we got it finished and we succeeded in playing for the 28 points. The main thing was that the integrity of the Ryder Cup remained uncompromised."

For this accomplishment then, and for being the first greenkeeping team in history to help win the Ryder Cup, the Extra Mile Award must be the icing on the cake.

Recognition from outside the industry is always a positive because, after all, without greenkeepers there would be no golf courses.

For the job done last year and little respite before the Wales Open, all praise toward Jim and his crew is thoroughly deserved for the way in which they continue to do our profession proud.

