

# An Open return

The Open Championship returns to Royal Lytham and St. Annes Golf Club this year and Head Greenkeeper, Paul Smith, provided GI with an insight into the preparations for the Championship and some fascinating background information on the historic links course

**A good ten years have passed since my first Open and much has and also has not changed. We are probably all more acutely aware and recognise how important our roles are in maintaining golf's green future. The Greenkeeper's role is pivotal, the policies we implement affect the original design characteristics of the course, the playing challenge it presents and the playing strategy adopted by the golfer. Our activities affect the ball and turf interaction; a soft course is a dead course. What**

**is particularly significant is how our practices enhance and protect the ecology of our green spaces.**

The Open Championship is something very special indeed and to be a part of this is a great privilege. It is a challenge that I relish, but one that is not without a headache or two or perhaps the odd broken nights sleep along the way. However, my greatest challenge of all still remains keeping the membership happy. These are the challenges and pressures that we all share in seeking near perfection for that special day on the golfing



calendar, which are not all that different no matter what course you are custodian of.

It is not until the final putt is made and the champion golfer is crowned that we can put our feet up momentarily before resuming normal business. Then we can reacquaint ourselves and spend some quality time with our family and friends. It is not always easy to maintain a work life balance being a greenkeeper and custodians of our precious green spaces. I was once given some sound advice by a wise old greenkeeper as he approached retirement after devoting many





years of loyal service: "Make sure you have a life outside work laddie". And that is what we must all strive to do. Fewer jobs can be quite as demanding but in the same light as rewarding.

### The Open Preparation

The preparation and conditioning of the course for an Open Championship is never far from my mind. This work is always ongoing. There is a sustainable ethos to course management and maintenance policies, which are set out with the intent to deliver consistently good standards of play 365 days of the year.

Managing a course in a holistic, sustainable way as close to nature as possible, has always been a challenge for the greenkeeper. Of course it does entail the use of water, fertiliser and chemicals but the art is to utilise these as sparingly as possible to give nature just a little helping hand in presenting a natural course.

Maintaining a consistently good quality course is achievable but delivering perfection is not. With just a little help from Mother Nature and a small amount of man's intervention we can achieve something worthy.

Royal Lytham and St. Annes presents a management and maintenance challenge. The 205 bunkers that we have on the Championship course provide not only a major challenge to the golfer, but also for our team.

Eighty bunkers have been rebuilt during our last phase of the bunker programme, in tandem with general turf reinstatement work. A great effort was made to ensure that this work was completed by Christmas. However, this winter has been a blessing compared to the winters of 2009 and 2010. The conditions have been conducive to completing our winter programme schedule, whilst ensuring that we have maintained good winter playing conditions.

### The Build Up

January to February: The course gets a very early and thorough spring clean. Specific activities will include aeration, topdressing and grooming. This is the period when our manpower resources also focus on the careful process of bunker preparation. During a careful bunker-by-bunker review, we will specifically ensure that the depth and angle of sand is appropriate to ensure playability for the

Championship. The angle of the greenside bunkers is set at 65–70°, fairway bunkers are set at an angle of 55–60°. We aim to maintain the angle of the sand at approximately 15–25°. The sand is sourced locally from the beach at St Annes and is screened on site to remove the shell and pebble content. Sand selection and suitability is always a hot topic at nearly every club, but in its 126-year history Lytham has kept to using the indigenous fine beach sand.

Our aim is to maintain a relatively firm bunker playing conditions that remain consistent, especially near to the face to reduce the likelihood of balls resting close to the bunker faces.

March to April: Activities will focus on ensuring that all our turfing works establish successfully, eliminating the development of seams, and guarding against drought damage. A dedicated team assigned to hand watering achieves this. This is paramount and ensures that our water usage is specifically directed to those areas of play that need it. Even with modern day automatic irrigation systems, this is not always achievable. We try to keep returfing to a minimum during the winter before an Open. However with 205 bunkers, which require the faces to be replaced on a regular basis, inevitably an element of turfing work adjacent to the bunker perimeters is required.

The playing surfaces are continually being refined. In tandem with regular sand topdressings, light fertiliser applications and grooming.

May to June: Early May presents another real challenge in presenting the course for the Lytham Trophy, which is an early season leading amateur tournament. This year, the course proved a formidable challenge even playing from forward tees, with little rough. Europe's number one (and the current world ranked number seven) amateur, Daan Huizing, was the outright winner at seven under par, with his nearest rival some 11 shots back.

By the time we eventually reach June and July, most of the specific maintenance schedule will have been implemented and our efforts are then geared towards intensifying our cutting activities, to ensure that the playing surfaces are refined down to tournament standards. It all sounds a simple and straightforward exercise, but it can be anything but if the weather turns against you. We have to be well versed in strategies in coping



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with the extremes in the weather these days. High winds, strong sunshine and heavy downpours are all conditions that can affect play.

Throughout our preparations well in advance of the year of the Open, the Sports Turf Research Institute closely monitors playing performance. The frequency of the STRI’s visits intensifies as the Open approaches. The objective of these visits is to ensure that specific performance criteria are met which fall within site specific tournament target ranges, which include:

The course is set up no differently for the Open than normal; the challenge remains the same as for the membership. Although it is fair

to say that we would normally be taking greater measures this year to reduce the severity of the rough in places, brought about by the wet spring and summer. The fairway widths vary from 20 to 40 yards, so the course presents a challenge but remains fair and generous in places. We will be maintaining a height of cut of 9-11mm depending on conditions. The first cut of semi rough is 3m wide at 50mm with the second cut also 3m at 100mm.

• **Soil moisture: measured as a percentage figure.**  
**Hardness (interaction between the ball and turf) is optimised without the potential to compromise turf health trueness**



**Factfile**

*Current species composition greens:*

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Browntop bent.....       | 43% |
| Fescue .....             | 27% |
| Poa annua .....          | 23% |
| Yorkshire fog.....       | 2%  |
| Perennial ryegrass ..... | 1%  |
| Others.....              | 4%  |

*Current species composition tees:*

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Browntop bent .....            | 45% |
| Fescue .....                   | 24% |
| Poa annua .....                | 17% |
| Smooth stalked meadow grass .. | 9%  |
| Yorkshire fog.....             | 1%  |
| Perennial ryegrass .....       | 3%  |
| Others.....                    | 1%  |



**and smoothness. Our target is 15 – 25%**

• **Firmness: measured in gravities. Target 100 – 120 gravities**

• **Smoothness: measured by vertical deviation in mm per metre. Target <18mm**

• **Trueness: measured by lateral deviation in mm per metre. Target <8mm**

• **Green speed: Target 10 – 10½ feet.**

So attention to detail is more than ever closely scrutinised. However, there is an acceptance that these historic natural courses are not supposed to be seamlessly manicured and that the conditions are a reflection of a lifetime of sound environmental, sustainable management policies. Every effort is made to ensure that the playing conditions are consistent and fair which takes a great deal of effort and dedication bearing in mind that three greens are known to have an old clay basin, some greens are more sheltered than others depending on the prevailing wind. Elevations vary and temporary structures like grandstands have some small affect again depending on wind direction.

### The Course Changes

In terms of design, only very carefully thought out changes have been made. If you have a valued masterpiece you are very mindful not to meddle.

The underlying key to the changes was to make the best players think more about their strategy of playing the holes. Fundamentally, this has been achieved by making sure the hazards at the driving areas require the golfers to consider whether taking the driver is the best option. The intention was not to take the

driver out of the player's hands but to add a little more risk to the adoption of an aggressive strategy. There was no target set for the overall length of the layout and each hole was considered on an individual basis and to ensure an even balance of lengths of holes throughout the course.

Some of the changes have been minor but others significant. The work has been varied and has entailed the construction of new bunkers, tees and the creation of swales along with the development of new dune systems and the repositioning of the 7th green in 2009.

All the changes are now in play and have strengthened a formidable course. Based on the changes that have been made it should give a sterner test than in 2001. What is really pleasing is how well the changes have blended into the existing links landscape, which has an odd mix of elevation changes of both natural and artificial sand dunes.

All in all these varied and subtle changes will only go to strengthen the course further to maintain its modern day challenge.

### Ongoing Maintenance post-2001

Royal Lytham and St. Annes is a fine example of nature and golf working in harmony together. Listed as a Biological Heritage Site by Lancashire County Council, its dune grassland and rare ecosystem preserve the ancient past of the site, now surrounded by red-brick Victorian houses, a school, hospital and a railway.

A great effort has been made to improve the dominance of finer grasses. We have embarked on an extensive overseeding programme, which has been in place for some

time. Our main objectives have been to reduce the overall content of coarser grasses and reinstate the dominance of the finer grasses such as Red, Cheving's and Sheep Fescues and Browntop bents. These are the indigenous grass species colonising coastal fringes. Unfortunately decades ago there tended to be the misguided use of inappropriate grass species, in particularly Rye grass. At the time this was seen as a solution to wear tolerance issues, but these grasses tended to have higher input requirements and dominated swards at the expense of the finer grasses.

The results from our commitment to a long term overseeding programme have been gradual but we are now starting to see the rewards.

Our greatest success has been the improvement and development of the fairways, which have undergone a treatment of thatch reduction, turf conditioning and sanding. Consequently the fairway surfaces are firmer, more refined and freer draining. We have fewer issues with worm casting and are less productive in terms of clipping yields. Improvement work on the course is continually ongoing.

Since 2001 we have embarked on a progressive ecological management programme developed to enhance the course's Biological Heritage Site status, which supports a mosaic of species; rich dune grassland, heath and scrub. This work has not only improved the ecology of the site but has restored the original open character of the links.

Over the past 12 years the club has been granted permission by the Forestry Commission to clear internal pockets of white Poplar trees and degenerate perimeter specimens. Some of these areas

#### Current species composition fairways:

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Browntop bent.....       | 28% |
| Fescue .....             | 44% |
| Poa annua .....          | 18% |
| Yorkshire fog .....      | 2%  |
| Perennial ryegrass ..... | 6%  |
| Others.....              | 2%  |

- There have only been 10 Head Greenkeepers in the club's 126 year history
- Henry Gillet has been the club's longest serving; he served 44 years
- Average annual rainfall 627mm
- Average annual sunshine 1526 hours
- Average day time temperature 12.6°C
- Average night time temperature 6.1°C





have been replanted with gorse and broom, which has had a positive ecological impact. One such impact has seen the increase in nesting and feeding habitat for small birds.

1. Linnets (*Carduelis cannabina*) is a red data species noted nesting within the gorse. They benefit from a variety of habitats; from dune grassland to feed and scrub to nest.

2. Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) is an amber data species, which is another uncommon bird nesting within the gorse plantation at the 18th hole.

The general theme of restoring an open links landscape and associated habitat has also seen an increase in and special importance to ground nesting birds including both the skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) and meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*).

**The Open Greenkeeping Team**

We have 11 permanent full timers, one part timer working two days a week and a member of staff on a short-term contract to ease the workload this year. However, an additional 24 Open tournament support staff supplement this for the week before and the week of the Open. We also have a small team of dedicated fitters and mechanics supplied by John Deere who are providing the tournament machin-

ery support along with Hunter Grinders. So our numbers swell to 40+ during the week of the Open. And of course we have the invaluable BIGGA Support Team so the level of expertise at hand to help is quite astounding.

For some members of the permanent team it will be their last Open; three of whom Richard Atkin, Phil Medcalf and David Troup have provided the club with a lifetime of loyal and worthy service. Other recent recruits will be experiencing and relishing their first Open Championship. It will be special for everyone involved. One thing for certain is we will all take away some lifelong memories as we witness the most gifted golfers in the world pit their wits against the course, the weather and each other. That should quench anyone's thirst.



*Equipment Inventory*  
A selection of the machinery used at Royal Lytham & St Annes

- 2 x Fairway Mower John Deere 3235C
- Fairway Mower John Deere 3235B
- 3 x Greens Triplex Mower John Deere 2500 E
- 2 x Utility Triplex Mower Toro 3100D
- 6 x Hand Mower 18" John Deere 180 B
- Hand Mower 22" John Deere 220C
- John Deere 8800 rotary
- Personnel Utility Vehicle, John Deere HDX
- 3 x Heavy Duty Turf Utility Vehicle
- Personnel Utility Vehicle, Carryall 252 Turf
- Personnel electric Utility Vehicle, E-Z-GO
- Toro Workman Drop Top dresser 1800
- Toro Workman Pro Pass Disc Top dresser
- Verti-cut units 480 T Thatchaway
- Tractor John Deere 4520 (loader)
- Tractor New Holland TN65S
- Tractor Ford New Holland 3930
- Tractor John Deere 4600 (loader)
- Trailed Semi-rough Gang Mower, Lloyds
- TM80 Ransomes Aerator
- TDS/32 Deep Spiker, Sisis
- Root Zone Injector, John Deere 700

For the full inventory, please visit [www.bigga.org.uk](http://www.bigga.org.uk)

Next Month's GI  
**- The Open Review**  
 All the news and stories from **The BIGGA Open Support Team** at Royal Lytham and St. Annes