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26 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

scoutily 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 as two or perhaps the odd badger might stray along the way. However, our greatest thrill-kings of all still remains keeping the membership happy. These are the challenges and pressures that we all share in working near perfection for that special day on the golfing

calendar, which are not all that different to many other courses 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 returning normal business. There we are, enquiring our lives 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 custodian of our precious green spaces. I was once given some sound advice by a wise old greenkeeper as he approached retirement after delivering many

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

The Open Preparation

The preparation and conditioning of the course for an Open Championship is never far from the 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 have 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 blowing 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 a 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 where 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 15-20°. The sand is sourced locally from the beach at St. Annes and is screened to always be free from 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-turf playing conditions that remain consistent, especially near to the fair to reduce the likelihood of balls resting close to the bunker feet.

March to April: Activities will focus on ensuring that all our turfing works establish successfully, eliminating the development of erosion, and planning against drought damage. A dedicated team assigned to bank watering achieves this. This is paramount and ensures that our water usage is specifically directed to those areas of play that need it. Dews with modern day automatic irrigation systems, this is not always achievable. We try to keep returning to a minimum during the winter before an Open.

However with 205 bunkers, which require the back to be replaced on a regular basis, probably an element of turfing work adjacent to the bunker perimeter is required.

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

May to June: Early May presents another real challenge in presenting the course for the Lytham and St. Annes tournament. This year, the course proved a formidable challenge even playing from forward tees, with little rough.

June's number one lead the current event ranked number seven overall. Dean Harding was the outright winner at seven under par, with his nearest rival seven 11 shots

behind. 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 normalising 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 us. We have to be well versed in strategies in coping

THE OPEN PREVIEW



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Greenkeeper Training

A guide to the range of training provided throughout the UK

There are now a number of GTC Quality Assured Centres and Training Providers across the UK Quality Assured logo

BIGGA is actively involved in raising the standard of Greenkeeper Training. The Association is a member of the Greenkeepers Training Committee and strives to enhance the level of education through various means, including Section, Regional and National workshops, seminars and conferences.

The range and quality of training now available throughout the UK means there is a training course for every greenkeeper. This should improve the quality of greenkeeping and help to produce better quality golf courses to the benefit of all within the industry.

Each Course Manager should recognise that their staff are trained to the highest standards. This begins by selecting a training provider that meets the criteria set down by the GTC. There is a cost, but, benefits education, training and economic success and all clubs should invest in the education of their staff.

SCOTLAND

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