

The second of our three part feature, offering an insight in to the preparations for the ISPS Handa PGA Seniors Championship at Slaley Hall, continues this month, as

Nathaniel Sylvester of the PGA, meets up with Course Manager, Steve Cram

Part
Two

Preparing Slaley Hall

If Steve Cram ever hits the karaoke machine he could be forgiven for belting out the hit, 'Why Does it Always Rain on me?' by Scottish band Travis.

But the ever-cheerful course manager at De Vere Slaley Hall is not the kind to let the elements cloud his sunny disposition – even if torrential rain, the odd snow flurry and frost have conspired to disrupt preparations for June's ISPS Handa PGA Seniors Championship.

Dealing with the micro-climate that periodically engulfs the Northumberland resort is all part of the job for Cram who has been employed for a total of 22 years at the European Senior Tour venue, with a four year stint at Close House sandwiched in between.

Like most of the UK, heavy rain through April and May has been an unwelcome guest, Cram describes it as simply 'unbelievable' with bouts of snow and frost complicating matters further.

"In April we had 186mm and from May 1 to May 17 we've had 100 mm," says Cram in a rare quiet moment in his hectic schedule.

"The net result is that growth

is slower than usual – the cool rain and temperatures keeps the ground cold, which has slowed the growth down.

"As a result of the rain, the focus is on trying to pick a gap in the weather where feed and fertiliser has time to get under the plant and not get washed away.

"We have had so much rain that it's a case of dodging the showers and trying to get a two or three hour window to get as many fairways done, sprayed and coloured up as possible."

With the 72-hole tournament, which features an array of golfing stalwarts, such as Ryder Cup captains Sam Torrance and Mark James, set to tee off on June 7, Cram and his team begin ramping up operations in May with the verti-cutting of greens followed by the top dressing of greens and sanding twice every two weeks.

"The verti-cutting helps take out the lateral growth and helps the sand bed into the grass sward," explains Cram.

"It is the equivalent of using a scarifier that rakes out the dead grass – only a lighter version."

The logistics of the top sand dressings of the Hunting Course's



18 greens and one practice green sees more than 50 tonnes laid down – 30 tonnes the first time round and 22 tonnes at the next sanding.

Despite the rain, Slaley Hall's greens drain quite well, however it is the cool temperatures that can be an issue for Cram when top dressing is being undertaken.

"It takes a lot of time for the sand to disappear so you can still see it. You also have to be careful that you don't smother the green.

"Last year we were top dressing



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every week, but this year we have to do it every other week.”

Like any master of his art, Cram has an array of tools at his disposal and Primo Maxx is a firm favourite. For the technically minded, its active ingredient is Trinexapacetyl, which inhibits gibberellic acid biosynthesis, resulting in decreased cellular elongation and internode length.

In short, vertical growth is slowed and energy is redirected to lateral stems and below ground plant parts.

The redirected energy is used to produce increased food reserves, bigger root systems, and increased lateral stem development for thicker healthier turf. Because the grass absorbs Primo Maxx quickly, it is rain-fast in 3 hours.

It all helps avoid growth during the tournament which is the big no-go.

“The last thing you want is greens to be stimping at 10 feet in the morning and seven feet in the evening, so it is very much a balanced approach with fertilisers to avoid too much upward growth.”

Cram manages his team with a combination of military precision, expert knowledge and unerring

instincts built up over his long career.

“I’m not that technical, but there are a few tricks around that help you out and Primo Maxx is one of those,” is his modest self-assessment.

One of his undoubted strengths is the team spirit and camaraderie he engineers among his staff of 10 full timers, which bumps up to 12 with summer casuals and a further four to six greenkeepers from other De Vere venues who join Slaley in the build-up to the PGA Seniors.

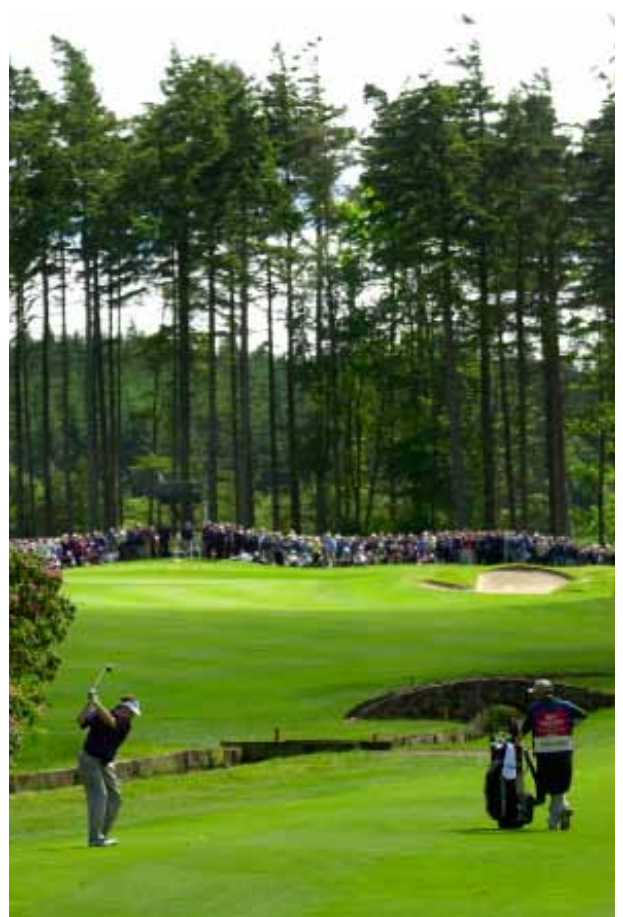
A key approach is giving his team ownership of a particular part of the course – be it fairways or greens.

“From May they will all be on the job they are doing during the tournament.

“There are a couple of reasons, firstly I give them ownership, it is their little bit of the course and that is their responsibility.

“If someone has got the job of doing lines, creating that diamond effect, then it’s his responsibility. I purposely do it because it gives them ownership.

“If I am not happy they will know it, but invariably they will get it right through pride. The team really



responds and I think they appreciate it and get into it.

“This is not just my golf course, it’s theirs too, and by doing it this way they feel part of the tournament, so when the tournament starts they can go out and tell family and friends - I did that, or I look after that.”

Another reason for job allocation is that Cram has to know down to the last minute how long it is going to take to carry out the various tasks of fairway and green cutting during the event itself.

“On Thursday and Friday there are two tee starts, so we have to be in and out without disturbing the players. For example, you can’t cut the 18th when they are teeing off the 10th, which is so close.

“We know exactly how long it takes as we time it in the build-up and know how long it is going to take to get them away before the players arrive.

“But the biggest challenge is the eve of the tournament pro-ams on Wednesday with shotgun start at 8 and then in the afternoon. We have to have all the course cut by 8 in the morning then go back out and cut the greens and do the divots after the afternoon.

“Wednesday is a long day – probably a 4.30am start and 10pm finish.”

By mid-May they are a couple of weeks behind schedule in terms of growth, but Cram is not panicking.

“With two or three days of warm weather we should be back to where we want although ideally I would rather be a couple of weeks ahead.

“The greens are okay but the fairways are just a little bit behind.

“You get used to the climate and we factor that in with our fertiliser regimes, using preferred suppliers, Sherriff Amenity and Everris, liquid feeds and fertilisers.”

If dodging the elements isn’t enough of a challenge, Cram also has to juggle the commercial demands of a busy course that is open to the public up until the Saturday before the tournament.

“The course is not closed until 4pm on Saturday and practice starts on Sunday so we have to work around that,” says Cram.

“We go in ahead of general play. The biggest problem is divots, and four times before the tournament we have a team of 25 volunteers that divot the fairways as we build up to the tournament. At 4pm on the Saturday before the tournament we will divot and rake all the bunkers.”

The ultimate test for Cram and



his team though will be the players’ reaction and they can be pretty demanding taskmasters in their expectations.

“The greens are the most important thing to the guys, particularly the speed. The guys expect it stimping at least 10 feet. They expect it to run smoothly, but not snakey where there is movement.

“In terms of the fairways we cut to 10mm, a lot tighter than for regular play and the same for the tee boxes.

“For bunkers tour players want a maximum of two-and-a-half inches





“The greens are most important, particularly the speed. The guys expect it stimping at least 10 feet. They expect it to run smoothly, but not snakey where there is movement”



Slaley Hall, in all its splendour, on a glorious day is an ideal setting for golf course photography
Images supplied by Professional Sports and The PGA

which is quite firm. They don't like it to plug, so want a firm lie.

“We also have to work with the PGA tournament staff for course set up as they mark-up the golf courses. This involves a lot of strimming because we have a lot of ditches and water.”

It's only when the final putt is drained on the Sunday that Cram and his team can finally relax and enjoy a well-deserved beer and reflect on their efforts.

“It's great to sit down and enjoy a beer because a great camaraderie

has built up between the staff and hopefully everybody has had a good tournament.

“The only downside is the Monday and Tuesday when you feel a bit down because you have been running flat out on adrenaline and the atmosphere of the tournament.

“But there is not too much time to dwell on that because there are still the regular customers to prepare for and you have to pick up and get on with it, hopefully though, without any rain!”