

Merion to Muirfield, who would be a Greenkeeper?



Donald Steel, GTC Chairman, Golf Course Architect and Golf writer, on the ongoing challenges facing greenkeepers

It was a timely reminder of the distance the modern ball travels that Merion had a par 4 finishing hole that could have played 530 yards for the US Open in June.

Justin Rose's glorious victory was completed with a classic drive and 4-iron when the 18th tee was moved forward to measure 511 yards but one interesting factor was the neat comparison with an equally epic climax from the past.

Rose's drive, blind over the hill, finished alongside the plaque marking the spot in 1950 from which Ben Hogan hit his famous 1-iron but the hole for that Open measured 448 yards; and Hogan was the best driver of his generation even though his appearance after a near fatal car smash the previous year was nothing short of miraculous. What is more, Rose's second shot finished at the back of a large green, Hogan's at the front left.

If the ball isn't going any further, as some suggest, an intriguing

question is why nearly every championship and tournament course in the world has sought extra yardage to shore up its defences? Merion, one of the shorter courses for a major championship, found itself back in favour after a spell of 32 years on the sidelines simply because it could be lengthened by 450 yards.

That, in itself, was some achievement although, equally remarkably, 135 of those yards came on three par 3s. The 3rd, 9th and 17th played 256, 236 and 246 yards, the fourth par 3, the 13th, no more than a chip and a putt. Incidentally, Merion's two par 5s, the 4th at 628 yards, come in the first four holes followed by two par 4s of 504 and 487 yards after which it was all downhill.

Well almost! For all that the layout included five par 4s under 368 yards, nearly every hole took its prisoners.

Nevertheless, Merion's reinstatement was a cause for rejoicing, a



Contact Details

David Golding
GTC Education Director
and European Greenkeeping
Education Unit Standards
Director

01347 838640
david@the-gtc.co.uk

GTC
Aldwark Manor
Near York
YO61 1UF

www.the-gtc.co.uk
www.egeu.eu
www.greenkeepertraining.com



You can follow the GTC on
Twitter @TheOfficialGTC

triumph for Matt Shaffer, Director of Golf Course Operations, whose brief was to set up Merion so that nobody broke par. Nobody did. Merion is a classic course of welcome variety that has contributed more than its share of glory to America's golfing history. One of its favourite features is a first tee right outside the locker room, its Englishness accentuated by its original title of Merion Cricket Club in the outskirts of Philadelphia. However, as Shaffer states, "Merion isn't European and it isn't American in design. It is Merion".

He added crucially, "there was so much at stake for this championship but the question was whether change could be made fairly and who decides? It would have been far easier to move greens but we established early on that that, more than anything, would ruin the integrity of Merion". The weather is always the mitigating factor and greenkeepers everywhere will have spared a thought for Matt who had to contend with a very wet build up



to his preparations and a tornado on the first morning.

By contrast, Muirfield, firm and fast, was bathed in sunshine. It is impossible not to make comparisons with Merion if only to underline that the Gods invariably have the last word. A year ago, they were pumping water out of bunkers at Lytham. Matt is a huge advocate of "firm and fast" but, as all greenkeepers recognise, he had to accept what came and deal with it.

Nevertheless, Merion is the latest example of almost obligatory course adjustment to suit current needs. Previously, in 1981, "the US Open was played with a soft ball, true temper shafts and persimmon woods". To my mind, one general guideline for any course set-up is encouragement of good driving, a point picked up by Paul Lawrie in Golf World recently. "The ball and the size of the driver head have changed the game the most. The ball goes further and doesn't move as much in the air, which isn't a good thing. A lot of mediocre to



Apprenticeships
Good for our Business

The GTC is funded by:

decent players are winning a lot of money. Before, you had to be really talented to do that. The art of driving has been lost".

On the eve of Muirfield, talk inevitably centred on irons off the tee, one leading player asking "when you hit a 2-iron 350 yards, why take a driver?" However, a precedent for irons was set in 1987 when, in the third round in terrible conditions of wind and rain, also at Muirfield, Sandy Lyle went round in 71 without hitting a single wooden club for any shot. 26 years on, players either couldn't, didn't want to or didn't need to, take a driver - one solution for a 379 yard par four being a 7-iron and a sand wedge.

Most courses were never designed to suffer some of the indignities

and battle lines have to be drawn early but a particular pet hate is encircling greens with collars of clinging rough and remote pin positions that can be virtually inaccessible even from the shortest range. Does anybody really applaud the need for a full swing to dislodge a ball within a few feet of the pin, knowing that, if they do, it will roll off the other side into somewhere just as unsavoury?

Green speed also comes more into the equation, today's sophisticated mowing machines achieving lower heights of cut, making selection of sympathetic pin positions even more problematic particularly with varying wind strengths. Greenkeepers need no reminding that playing conditions can vary

"Merion's reinstatement was a cause for rejoicing, a triumph for Matt Shaffer, Director of Golf Course Operations, whose brief was to set up Merion so that nobody broke par"

inflicted on them nowadays even if it is acknowledged that width of fairways and pin positions are key ingredients in course presentation. Long ago, it was said that "without fast greens and thick rough, Merion, for all the strategic niceties of the holes, couldn't hope to stand up to the present professional brigade". But narrow fairways and thick rough can curb aggression which isn't always what people pay to see although, happily, links golf should never respond purely to muscle power. Subtlety, touch, feel and judgement are greater requirements.

When limits are exceeded on any course, conditions quickly become undesirable not to say impossible. Rough cannot be grown to order

significantly between six o'clock in the morning and six in the evening never mind from week to week. Things are rarely easy. Less than a month after the US Open, Matt, back in Merion, faced 95 degree heat and insufferable humidity. Who'd be a greenkeeper?!

And somewhere in the back of my mind, I seem to remember Phil Mickelson fearing on the first evening that some parts of some of the greens at Muirfield might be dead. Happily, Colin Irvine and his gallant band of helpers quickly showed they were alive and kicking, Mickelson, a Links convert (even without a driver in his bag) responding with the round of his life to gain the oldest title in the game. Another happy ending for all.

IBM IT PARTNER											113th U.S. OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP® Course Statistics - All Rounds	
Hole	Par	Yards	Eagles	Birdies	Pars	Bogeys	Double Bogeys	Other	Rank *	Average		
1	4	350	1	81	308	58	8	1	16	3.987		
2	5	556	3	96	266	71	15	6	14	5.042		
3	3	256	0	27	266	151	13	0	8	3.328		
4	5	628	0	54	279	99	17	8	10	5.230		
5	4	504	0	12	169	220	51	4	2	4.706		
6	4	487	0	23	235	171	26	1	4	4.445		
7	4	360	0	62	300	90	10	4	13	4.110		
8	4	359	2	83	287	77	6	1	15	4.011		
9	3	236	0	23	273	129	28	3	6	3.375		
Out	36	3736	6	461	2383	1056	174	28		38.237		
10	4	303	4	124	257	56	12	3	17	3.906		
11	4	367	0	70	258	102	21	6	11	4.206		
12	4	403	0	58	298	85	14	2	12	4.133		
13	3	115	0	126	291	39	1	0	18	2.814		
14	4	411	0	30	243	147	28	9	5	4.444		
15	4	464	0	42	239	129	29	18	3	4.455		
16	4	430	0	33	285	116	20	3	9	4.291		
17	3	246	1	22	270	141	20	3	7	3.363		
18	4	521	0	11	178	208	54	6	1	4.707		
In	34	3260	5	516	2319	1023	199	50		36.309		
Total	70	6996	11	977	4702	2079	373	78		74.546		

Stats courtesy of the USGA