



Profile

Name: Colin Irvine
Born: Haddington, East Lothian, 13
January 1965.....
Handicap: 10.....
Hobbies: Golf, clay pigeon shooting...



Double take at Muirfield

How is Colin Irvine preparing for staging the greatest golfing show on earth – 11 years after his last experience of The Open? How have expectations changed, and what are the technical challenges? Steve Castle found out



The last time Colin Irvine took charge of preparing a course for The Open Championship in 2002, Ernie Els scooped the Claret Jug. So there's a pleasing symmetry to The Big Easy returning to Muirfield to defend the title this summer.

The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers – to give Muirfield its official title – is one of just 15 courses in the world to receive maximum marks in Rolex's recent top 1,000 Golf Courses book. I arrived on a perfect sunny winter's morning, with golfers – some clad

in traditional plus fours – strolling round the course which has tested legends of the sport since hosting its first Open in 1892. The tournament's first tee shot was still months away, and it was hard to see exactly where tens of thousands of spectators plus media – and the BIGGA Open Support Team – will be housed.

I asked Colin what he's most looking forward to and he replied, tongue firmly in cheek, "Sunday night". He added: "We reopen on the Monday morning for the R&A's official guests' day with the holes

12th green courtesy of Alastair Brown

in the same position as The Open. We then cut the greens, rake the bunkers, then send the guys home because everybody's very tired."

After studying at Elmwood College Colin was offered a summer job at Muirfield in 1981, and after catching the greenkeeping bug was promoted to second in charge before leaving for Germany after the 1992 Open.

"I fancied travelling and doing something different, and I like a challenge, so I spent two years at Dusseldorfer Golf Club. It was an inland course with a completely different setup so I knew it would broaden my education."

He admitted he spoke no German on arrival – but soon picked up the language after studying at night school. After a valuable two years he returned and became Course Manager in 1994. So how has his role changed since Els' last triumph in 2002?

"If anything you're less hands-on. There are more meetings and you rely more on your deputy and green staff. We don't have a greens chairman here. I speak to the Secretary three times a week. We also have five committee meetings a year, from budgeting to maintenance work – anything really.



A map with plans for the stands and the tented village



“We topdress the greens with pure sand every three weeks, then they’ll get an application of lawn sand in April and an organic fertiliser in late May”

“If they have a question they can put it straight to me so it works well.”

Colin is relaxed despite me bombarding him with questions, eager to discover the technical secrets of preparing a course for an event of this magnitude. There’s already a map on his office wall showing the planned locations of the spectator stands and also the tented village.

He said: “We topdress the greens with pure sand every three weeks, then they’ll get an application of lawn sand in April and an organic fertiliser in late May – although this is dependent on weather. We use a lot of wetting agents to let the irrigation water through as evenly as possible so the rootzone is evenly moist.

“The greens are fescue dominant. More bent comes in if you get wet summers, you can’t help that. Last spring the fescue was beautiful on them because it was 23C in March.

“Then the weather deteriorated from there. Of course, the weather’s totally out of your hands – you just have to adapt to it and work round it. Sunlight was a big factor last year – we barely had any! But if you think we’ve got it tough, you should speak to the guys on other courses...”

The contrast in rainfall figures between the East and West of Scotland is truly remarkable. Last month’s GI featured The Carrick on Loch Lomond that had a staggering 1800mm of rainfall last year, following on from 2200mm in 2011.

This dwarfs Muirfield’s rainfall in 2012 which was 782mm – although that was their highest for ten years. Unfortunately the team did have to battle poor conditions prior to their last Open.

“It was very wet in 2002. There were no flooded bunkers or anything, but of course you prefer a links course to have a drier, browner look about it.

“We sand the fairways and the surrounds a lot more now trying to compensate if it’s wet - although we do that every year, not just because it’s The Open.

“July is an unpredictable month here. Over the last ten years we get 71mm in July on average. The wettest was 112mm in 2007 and the driest was 18mm in 2004. There’s generally a westerly wind but on the Saturday of the last Open we had a north-easterly storm and there were a lot of high scores.

“The drainage is good but if you’re using a lot of heavy machinery things get compacted.

“The core full-time team numbers the same as 2002 - we have myself, one mechanic, one trainee and nine full-time greenkeepers, five of whom were here last time. It may seem a big staff to some people, but we look after a 220 acre golf course plus 300 acres of dune land and woodland. We also hand mow greens, tees and aprons so it’s very labour intensive.

“Of course we have extra support staff during the Championship. Rather than cutting fairways or tees at night the R&A want everything done on the mornings, heightening the presentation.

“Obviously this requires more staff so we’re very grateful to the local courses at Gullane, Archerfield, Luffness and the Renaissance Club who have all agreed to allow one of their greenkeepers to work here during The Open. We also have a greenkeeper from each of the other Open venues, a few on scholarships from the R&A and of course the BIGGA Support Team.”

This support network offers divoting assistance as well as bunker raking and help with any other tasks. As Colin said: “If we’re not divoting or raking bunkers in the morning it frees us up for other tasks. We double cut greens with 18



inch hand mowers with groomers to refine things. This is time consuming work so we do need support.

"The R&A will decide on the green speed, they normally say about 10.5. Through the summer they run between 9.5 and 11 anyway.

"We close the course a fortnight before it all starts, and as any greenkeeper will tell you, it's a lot easier to work without golfers! We don't actually make any changes to our procedures, it's more that everything intensifies.

"The Sunday before The Open is a test day where we do everything that we would do before the Thursday of the tournament, and then another dummy run on the Tuesday before.

"A couple of years ago MJ Abbott installed a new RainBird irrigation system to make things more controllable in the run-up to a tournament. If you have to slow the greens down or add a bit of moisture you've got that facility rather than going out with a hose."

It turns out that the major change in 11 years is in the design of the course, which officially opened in 1891. Over the winters of 2010 and 2011, renowned golf course architect Dr Martin Hawtree carried out a review of Muirfield, mainly to ensure it remained a true challenge for the world's best golfers. In summary the changes were:

- The introduction of new bunkers in selected drive areas
- The relocation of greenside bunkers to tighten the entrances to certain greens

- The extension of certain greens to provide more championship pin positions

- The introduction of six new championship tees, extending the course to 7245 yards

Colin says: "This hasn't changed the characteristics of the course. The most noticeable difference is at the 9th which is now a longer par five into the prevailing wind."

The team have also completed intense work on the rough. Colin adds: "Muirfield is famed for its fast growing rough. It's hard to judge because of the uncertainty over the weather. You obviously want it long enough to cater for a mishit shot but not so long the ball is lost."

I accept the unmissable opportunity to walk parts of the course with Colin and stand on the 18th tee gazing towards the distant green and the famous clubhouse. The prospect of having to get par from here to secure the Claret Jug would surely fill even the most experienced golfer with dread. Over to you Tiger, Rory, Justin and Ernie.

AERATION PROGRAMME

- 8mm or 12mm solid tining of the greens, aprons and tees
- Fairways vertidrain – 19mm carries and fairways, 12mm fairway approaches
- Greens tined once or twice a year, either in November or February depending on the weather
- Fairways tined once a year or once every two years

HEIGHT OF CUT (SUMMER)

- 4mm minimum on greens, generally 4.5mm
- Aprons and tees 8mm
- Fairways and surrounds 11mm

ABOVE: A view towards the famous clubhouse

RIGHT: 18th fairway courtesy of Alastair Brown

MACHINERY LIST

TRACTORS

John Deere 4520
John Deere 4600 with loader
John Deere 4410 with loader
John Deere 2326

FAIRWAYS

John Deere 7500E x 2
John Deere 8000E

GREENS

John Deere 2500E x 2
John Deere 180 SL x 8

TEES

John Deere 220C x 4

APRONS

John Deere 180C x 5

GEN MACHINERY

John Deere Pro Gator
John Deere E Gators x 3
John Deere 1565 with Laztec deck
John Deere 2653 B
John Deere 365 Gang Mower
John Deere Aercore
Wiedenmann Terra Spike
Wiedenmann Super 600 Flail Mower
Dakota 410 & 415
Topdressers
Vredo & Charterhouse
Overseeders
TruTurf Rollers x 2

WORKSHOP

Hunter Grinders/ Jupiter & Orion; Rotary Two Post Lift



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