



LONDON CLUB ON THE UP AND UP

Scott MacCallum visited the London Club during the busiest week of its year and witnessed a club at the top of its game

Visit the London Golf Club and two things will quickly become apparent. It's not within the sound of Bow Bells - it's actually set in beautiful Kent countryside away from, but within easy reach, of London itself. But, like the city, it's very much a place where it all happens. Put bluntly, it never stops at the London Golf Club, and the greenkeeping team takes whatever is thrown at it in its stride.

Whether it be preparing for eight consecutive days of professional golf in the shape of the London Senior Masters and accompanying pro-ams – with shotgun starts - or ensuring that a half a million pound luxury cruiser is successfully manoeuvred into place in front of the clubhouse, the team makes sure it all happens without a hitch.

Investment has been poured into the Club since it was taken over by Spanish real estate company, the Bendinat Group, four years ago. Before then the Club, originally a Japanese venture, had seen fluctuating fortunes since it was opened in 1993.

However, the future now looks particularly rosy, even more so when you consider that the London Olympics are set to regenerate the east side of London and place much more emphasis on sport.

One of the initiatives reintroduced by the new owners has been the London Seniors Masters which sees the burgeoning European Seniors Tour arrive in town.

“This week is a real test. It takes you right out of your comfort zone,” said Peter Todd, Courses Manager, speaking in the middle of producing tournament playing conditions.

The London Golf Club greenkeeping team of 24 - which is supplemented by additional crew from the likes of The Belfry, The Grove and Tandridge GC - is pushed to its limits, working round the clock and round the players to meet the needs of the event.

“We've been working split shifts to ensure that the other course is maintained for our members use during this week,” explained Peter.

“Shot-gun starts do add to the pressure and the guys work from 5am to 10am and then from 2.30pm to around 7.30pm. Some volunteer to work on the other course from 10am to 2.30pm. In the main it's five hours in the morning and five hours in the afternoon and evening for a ten hour day.”

Most of the cutting is carried out after play has finished each day to fit in with the Tour schedule and as generally it offers drier conditions.

“Continuity during tournament week is important and so key operations are allocated to specific greenstaff in the run-up to the event particularly while stripes are being 'burnt in'. If we had two people of different heights cutting fairways for example, their sight lines would be slightly different and we'd have inconsistency of stripe.” explained Peter.

With regard to keeping a course at its best, peaked, for the week, nothing is left to chance.

“We are constantly aware of, and monitoring, stress levels, rainfall patterns and maintenance regimes to make fine adjustments. For example, the other evening five mil of rain fell so we altered the mowers to get the accuracy we were looking for. Our normal practice is spot watering with virtually no overhead irrigation during the tournament on greens surfaces,” said Peter, adding that praise on course condition from the likes of Sam Torrance, who eventually won the event, make it all the more satisfying.

Set in more than 700 acres of Kent countryside, the Club has two courses; the Jack Nicklaus-designed Heritage and its sister course, the International. The work makes mammoth and varied demands on Peter's time; an example being the enormous task of relining eight lakes.

“It trips off the tongue but the logistics were huge. It was a £1 million project. The lakes are all interlinked, stretching the length of the estate, and are a part of the Club’s extremely elaborate in-house water recycling scheme.”

All the run-off water, including the grey water from the clubhouse, flows into the system and is used as irrigation water – around 80% of the irrigation supply is recycled, which meant that last year’s drought had very little impact on the club.

The scale of the projects that the team undertake are also shown in the up keep of eleven miles of cart paths and extensive new tree plantations – a result of a £10,000 annual spend on a tree and gorse programme. On top of that, there is the detailed planting around the clubhouse, which is looked after by a full time horticulturalist, who ensures that every plant is labelled so that members and visitors can enjoy them to the full.

“We always look at ways of bringing ourselves up to date with equipment and feel it’s vital to continually review our maintenance practices” explained Peter. For example, a Toro Sidewinder is used for cutting most slopes now rather than a Flymo.

Since the Bendinat Group took over the aim has been to run operations from the head and not the heart, with profit being the name of the game.

“Profitable golf stems from sustainable golf. We have to meet the needs of our customers while at the same time minimising inputs of water and fertiliser – not only for ecological reasons but for the technical and cost benefits.

“By only applying minimal quantities and by always using information and the latest technology – for example regularly measuring evaporation, tissue analysis, soil temperatures and more – we can make quick informed decisions about fertiliser programmes using foliar sprays. It can be slightly more labour intensive but it allows us to fine-tune applications and minimise both quantities and cost at the same time as meeting turf needs” said Peter.

The injection of funds has also allowed the greenkeeping department to re-equip itself with all the latest machinery from mowers and tractors to workshop grinders. More than just a “shopping expedition” this was an opportunity to address the Club’s equipment schedule and create a greenkeeping inventory in accordance with the desire to maximise efficiencies, not only on the course but from a maintenance perspective as well. Through careful selection and identifying areas of work which can be contracted out, it has enabled the department to make a 10% reduction in the size of its fleet.

The ever-changing face of greenkeeping continually presents fresh challenges – gone are the days when the Club sought to be totally self-sufficient. Now large scale operations, such as fairway coring, tree planting and over-seeding across the courses are outsourced, leaving the staff time to focus on the fine turf areas.

The experience that the London Golf Club greenkeepers acquire stands them in good stead and former employees have secured positions at some of the world’s top golfing venues including The Belfry, Loch Lomond, The K Club and Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand.

The fact that the London Golf Club exists at all may well, be down to one of this country’s most famous political husband and wife. The tale goes that Mrs Thatcher was on a trade mission to Japan and was approached by some Japanese business men who wanted to build the best golf course in the world. Legend has it that Mrs Thatcher told them that she had a country to run but that they’d better speak to golf-loving Dennis. He





Bunker work can be labour intensive



Peter Todd



Looking good!



Top quality presentation

persuaded them to build the club in this country and ultimately Dennis became Club President.

It goes without saying that golf is big business nowadays and if confirmation of this were required, you need look no further than the London Golf Club marketing team who admit to taking the lead from their greenkeeping colleagues.

“Green fees have risen from £45 to more than £100 in the last three years, testament to the high standards set at the club through the combined efforts of a young, go-ahead team where everyone has the authority to pitch in with ideas,” said Marketing and Sales Director Heath Harvey.

Having achieved so much in such a short time in turning the Club in a new direction, the ultimate aim now is to secure a regular European Tour event. The odds are already looking good and with the drive and enthusiasm of everyone at the London Golf Club you certainly wouldn't bet against it!

www.londongolf.co.uk



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Modern units are easier to work on and remove for sharpening. Note also the access to the hydraulic drive motor and the routing of the hoses. Hydraulic leaks are increasingly rare on modern kit, but only if it has not been subject to unskilled maintenance attention.

PLANNING BETWEEN DEALER AND MANUFACTURER TO GET BEST MAINTENANCE

Making sweeping generalisations is always dangerous. That said, the way in which modern mowing and ancillary equipment is maintained has tended to settle into a pattern; dealers carrying out the first and possibly major services on new kit, routine maintenance being left to course personnel. But what about the need to carry certain spares and how well trained are those who are expected to keep everything running?

Although there remain a good number of golf clubs with pretty grim workshops, there is a growing trend that has seen equipment housing and workshop facilities improved considerably in recent years. No surprise in this; modern equipment soaks up a great deal of money and it needs setting up correctly too. It pays to look after it.

Manufacturers are doing their bit to reduce maintenance costs, modern machines proving typically easier to give a routine service 'in house'.

Details that can include improved access to lubrication points through to easier to drain hydraulic tanks and engine sumps are just part of the story. Consider cutting units that can be removed without skinned knuckles and rounded-off nuts reduce the effort re-grind bottom knives and cylinders. Then there are improved hydraulic hose runs that are less likely to chafe or even the wide use of radiator screens.

The problem is, making machines easier to service does not mean just anyone can set the kit up to work properly. In some instances, it could be argued setting up a modern greens triple is an art in itself. Trained personnel will always be needed to make any item of kit work at its best, but there is a real danger that the skills needed to look after modern equipment is under-estimated. Keeping modern mowers running goes beyond the need to keep everything greased and changing the engine oil and hydraulic filters.



Modern grinding equipment includes models that are easier to set up and operate than some older designs, but that is not to say they can be used by just anybody. The Bernhard Blade Rite 1750 is among the easiest to set-up in the company's range, and can relief grind with the bottom knife in-situ.



Storing equipment under cover, and keeping it clean, is a key maintenance task. If there is a shortage of workshop skills it can pay to hire in a trained mechanic to carry out routine and general servicing. Sharing resources with a neighbouring course can work well.



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It can prove more economical to have a third-party to sharpen the mowers. There is no shame in picking and choosing the jobs that are carried out in-house. If someone who used to do all the grinding moves on, do not assume it is a job that can be picked up by existing members of staff.

Then there is the issue of grinding cylinders in-house. Modern grinding equipment is certainly more user friendly than it used to be, but to suggest this has de-skilled the job is way off the mark. To get the best from any make of model of grinder takes skill. If those skills are not available in the workshop, buying in a grinder will not see them develop overnight. There is no shame in having a third party re-grind your cylinders!

Similarly, a well disciplined workshop does so much more than just keep mowers in tip-top order. It is the details that help keep the equipment 'fleet' ready to go, such as ensuring tyres are inflated to the correct pressures, checking machinery returning from an intensive period of use is not stored needing attention and making sure certain fast moving parts are carried in-house to reduce downtime.

Those who have access to a good dealer locally may well be able to get round a spares stocking problem. But those faced with a bit of a drive to pick up spares, or have them delivered, really do benefit from having a few common parts on hand.

Where problems can arise is when there is a decision made to buy in a range of new equipment all at once. The chances are the new machines will differ from the replaced kit, even assuming the replacements are from the same manufacturer. There is always a risk that a carefully planned parts stock can quickly end up becoming obsolete.

As is so often the case, the key to ensuring maintenance can be maintained at a high level is planning. Forward thinking can help ensure fast moving parts for soon to be replaced equipment are run down, even if this may mean it is necessary to buy in the odd extra filter, blade or fastener to keep a machine going. Similarly, the type of parts that may be needed for new kit may differ from those stocked in the past. Here it pays to talk to the manufacturer and dealer, seeking advice on what parts it

will be a good idea to have on hand. It is well worth trying to work out a maintenance regime long before any new equipment deal is signed.

Terms and conditions relating to warranties need understanding good and early too. What servicing can be done in-house? How is a warranty claim handled? What is covered? How long does the warranty last? Can failed components be replaced in-house? If you do not ask these and other questions you may find a policy change could see the cost of parts you thought were covered coming with a bill.

Another vital issue relates to the use of spurious parts. A manufacturer's warranty will clearly state non-approved spares can impact upon a warranty claim. More important, it is best to maintain good relations with your supplying dealer. Buying genuine parts from them is a key revenue earner for them, so if you want their future support it is only fair to help them in return.

As to the manufacturers, it is fair to say most of them offer pretty similar terms and warranty conditions in real terms. There will be a few differences in the wording in the 'terms and conditions' small print, but these days a new equipment deal is unlikely to fall down through not offering pretty similar warranty cover. Although extended warranties may be offered, the cost of the total purchase and finance package is more important than how that final sum has been arrived at.

One final point is the status of those who look after the equipment. The skills and training required to look after greens and fairways has at long last started to be recognised more formally. Those with mechanical skills have an equally valid role to play. They too need recognition for what they do. It would be pretty difficult to keep everything in order without the workshop staff to maintain the equipment.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

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Personal protective equipment (PPE) is defined as something intended to be worn or held by a person which protects them from risks to their H&S at work. A suitable risk assessment will identify if PPE is required and what type. Typical examples are head, foot and eye protection where impact or dust and chemical splashes have been identified as hazards. Less well recognised items can be adverse weather clothing.

PPE should be the solution to protect people, not the first line of defence. The reason for this is PPE only protects those who are wearing it and not others in the same work area. The hierarchy of protecting people's safety of, elimination, reduction and control measures ensures everyone's safety. Only where the risk from a hazard cannot be fully controlled by other means will make the wearing of PPE an acceptable solution in protecting people's safety.

Where issued, PPE should be: Free of charge to employees; Suitable to control the risks identified e.g. eye protection to protect against chemical splashes will not be suitable for angle grinder use; Adjustable to fit the wearer; Not expose the wearer to greater risks by wearing it e.g. heavy waterproof clothing may cause people engaged in manual work to over-heat. In these cases a change in the method of work or more specialised PPE will be required; Compatible with other items of PPE that are being worn.

One vital part in the selection of PPE often ignored is the comfort of the user. Having identified that PPE is required it is then vital that it is worn. Bulky, uncomfortable equipment is less likely to be worn than

something that fits well, looks like everyday wear and is comfortable to wear e.g. where the requirement for impact resistance is low a modern pair of safety glasses be more readily worn than goggles. Where possible the user should be involved in the selection of PPE as it will increase the likelihood of it being used.



Having issued PPE to employees the employer has a duty to: Ensure replacements are available if required; Provide adequate storage to keep it free from damage and clean when not in use; Provide training on why PPE is necessary, how it is to be fitted and used and how to recognise any defects in the equipment; Inform employees on how to report defective or lost PPE and how replacements can be obtained; Ensure the equipment is worn when necessary, even for one off jobs that will last a short time. Failure to ensure the wearing of PPE can result in prosecution of the employer and a reduction in injury compensation to the employee involved in the event of an incident.

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