



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.

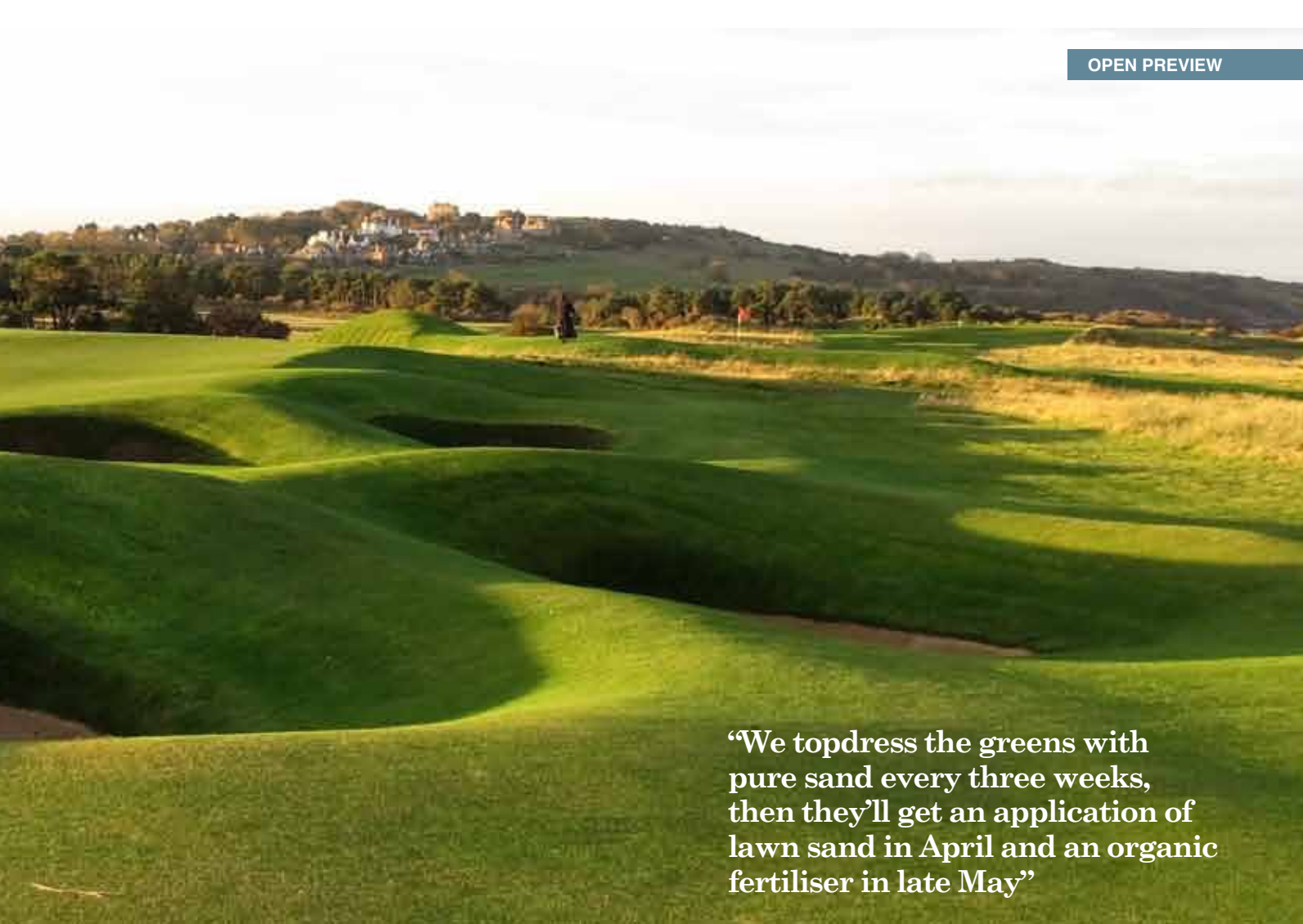
"I fancied travelling and doing something different, and I like a challenge, so I spent two years at Dusseldorfer Golf Club. It was an inland course with a completely different setup so I knew it would broaden my education."

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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St. Mellion
Course Manager

Getting to **know** ...what your **members** want

In a bid to answer this fundamental question, Mike Bush MG – Course Manager at St Mellion International Golf Club - quizzed hundreds of the club's members, and the results are helping to shape his future strategy

St Mellion's Player Survey has highlighted that course condition is a key priority for members – and it's also provided some key pointers regarding turf management practices and priorities in the future for Mike.

Presenting the results at BIGGA's Devon & Cornwall Spring Seminar, held at the Club, Mike identified that the condition of greens was consistently the most important factor for members across the Club's two 18-hole courses - the Kernow - designed primarily as a resort golf course - and the original championship Nicklaus Signature Course.

The condition of fairways and tees were also of very high importance, although tees were of slightly less importance to lower handicap players on the Nicklaus Course.

Design and aesthetics of the playing environment were also ranked as highly important.

"Pleasingly for the greenkeeping team, the satisfaction with the condition of most aspects of the playing surfaces was high, especially the greens and fairways," reported Mike. "However, the slightly lower satisfaction of the tee conditions has indicated we will need to focus more on those areas to bring them up to the same high level as the rest of the course."

He added that the price of membership was listed as the second most important factor on both courses. "It is a factor that had to be acknowledged in the current economic climate. We have to manage our costs more effectively to ensure our membership price remains competitive, and to recognise that we don't have a blank cheque to

spend on areas that won't give members a valued return."

The Survey was developed and tailored to the Club's specific needs by Syngenta, based on a previous survey which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

Managing to players' demands

The survey did throw up some fascinating differences between the Club's two courses and the golfers that play them. Mike says the results could now help the team tailor management of the two courses more effectively to cater for the different players' average abilities and meet required criteria of levels of importance.

On the Kernow course, which is predominantly played by golfers with relatively high handicaps, the

key factor for fairway playability was to have the ball sitting proudly on the turf surface, with tight mown turf far less important. On the Nicklaus Course, however, where the majority of players surveyed had a handicap of less than 15, tightly mown fairways were rated as far more crucial. "That has implications for height and frequency of cut and other practices that we can use to help present the sort of playing surfaces that better meet the different demands of players," he added.

Ironically, all the players rated a dense fairway sward of low importance, yet that is the very feature that delivers the ball sitting proudly as they wanted. Mike believes this highlighted the need to phrase any survey questions in a way that players would understand and around the features they are looking for.

Smooth greens

Another fascinating finding for Mike and the team was the fact responses to questions about the greens identified overwhelming demand for smooth and even paced greens, with fast ball roll lower than the ranking for greens conditions.

"That goes against the typical car park comments and the frequent calls we hear for the need for speed. This now gives us evidence to discuss with members what they really want, and explain what we are doing to deliver it.

"It doesn't mean that we will slow greens down - since smooth consistent surfaces will almost always be quick - but does change the emphasis of what we are looking to achieve with cutting heights and management for dense, smooth surfaces."

Rough challenge

Across the courses there were adverse comments about the density of the rough, which the team are going to work to address over coming seasons.

Mike says: "It may be that we have made the rough just too challenging for players, to the point that it's spoiling their game.

"With relatively low scores for satisfaction in aspects such as finding their ball and the ability to play out of the rough, we clearly need to look at ways to open out the rough and encourage a higher proportion of finer, wispy grasses.

It shifts the balance between what we see as providing a golfing challenge and defining aesthetically pleasing hole designs using the rough, with the need to maintain playability and enjoyment."

If you would be interested in running a similar Player Survey on your course, please log on to GreenCast - www.greencast.co.uk - and follow the link to send an email to register your interest.

BELOW: Delegates at BIGGA's Devon and Cornwall Spring Seminar



The St Mellion Player Survey was developed and tailored to the Club's specific needs by Syngenta, based on the company's original Golf Player Survey, which looked at general trends and demands among the golfing public across more than 300 courses in 2011/12.

The findings from the 260 St Mellion members who took part in the on-line questionnaire over the early part of 2013 were remarkably consistent, but added a level of detail to enable Mike Bush to consider future actions. Read the full report on the GreenCast website.

syngenta
www.greencast.co.uk
www.greencast.ie



Mike and his team had already been trialling the use of Rescue to remove coarse grasses in the rough and leave desirable finer fescue species, in an effort to reduce time players spend looking for balls and to speed up play – which was a key area of dissatisfaction for some players.

Mowing matters

The beautifully presented courses at St Mellion come at a cost of time and effort to hand cut greens, tees and approaches. The fairways are carefully striped and clippings boxed throughout the playing season.

It's an attention to detail that gives Mike and the greenkeeping team immense pride, but the survey revealed this is largely overlooked by players. More surprisingly, players seemed totally unconcerned about striped and well defined fairways.

"That raises questions about how we manage mowing in the future, which might possibly release time and budget to spend in other areas." However, he will raise these questions with members before introducing changes and may repeat the survey to check responses.

"It would also appear that they are unconcerned that the greens are cut with pedestrian mowers – it came bottom in importance among the Kernow respondents and very low for players on the Nicklaus. However, they both rated smooth ball roll and even pace as crucial – which are both enhanced by the accuracy of pedestrian cutting. That mean we possibly need to better explain the link between our greenkeeping activities and the resulting playing quality, so I feel the question's terminology may have been misunderstood."

Ageing golfers

Mike acknowledged that the survey highlighted the issue of an ageing of golf population, especially in the South West region where there is a higher proportion of retired players. More than 70% of respondents on both courses were over 50 years old, with around 45% more than 66.

"We know that we need to be doing more to attract a new, younger generation of golfers to the game; having greater feedback from them would possibly enable us to do more to meet their demands – whether that be in specific playing conditions, or a game format they would want to participate in more."

The survey did positively identify that an internet-based questionnaire could reach the older genera-

tion, but it may be that a survey for younger players needs to feature fewer, shorter questions directly related to topics that may interest them, which they could answer quickly. It could also be placed on Twitter or Facebook to encourage greater participation.

Attractive proposition

The survey also looked at what specific factors attracted players to a different course – providing a valuable insight into what might tempt members away, as well as elements that could be enhanced to bring in new players.

The design of the golf course unanimously came out as the top factor that attracted them to a course, followed by the aesthetics of the course and the quality of greens. Turf quality on the rest of the course, along with a friendly atmosphere in the club, ranked lower.

Mike believed these results demonstrated that investment in new features on the course and improving the quality of playing surfaces was always going to prove a key factor in attracting new players, as well as maintaining the interest and satisfaction of existing members.

Justifying investment

Mike added the results could prove valuable in helping to justify investment and expenditure in key areas of the course where they now know that members will welcome improvements.

"We have been looking to do further work on the drainage across the course to improve year-round playability, which was really put to the test last year.

"The fact that members have identified this as an area of low satisfaction adds weight to the need for action. I am keen to do more to further improve the tees, which again we know is an area to prioritise with a re-leveling and drainage programme.

"General Managers and Directors all love data and make their business decisions based on stats. We now have a wealth of valid information to influence what we do and why.

"It also gives us greater opportunity to discuss issues with members and to demonstrate what we are doing for their benefit.

"We now have a benchmark on players' needs and satisfaction with the Club and the courses, which we could refine and repeat in the future to ensure we are preempting changing demands and meeting what the players want."

How do you make the step up from Assistant to Course Manager? In the first of a two-part special, consultant Kevin Munt gives you a potential roadmap to success



18 steps to becoming a Golf Course Manager