MAGCS Directors Column

The 1984 British Open
Old Course, St. Andrews, Scotland

by Joe P. Williamson, CGCS
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I must admit that when I first played a Scottish golf course, I didn't think much of it. On that basis, the old saying, "First impressions are lasting," made me less than complimentary about the staging of this year's British Open.

Yet that is far from the case. I was avidly looking forward to the contest over what I read is one of the finest settings, greatest tests in golf.

This is all based on the fact that St. Andrews grew on me. Those early impressions of Scottish golf courses were happily misplaced because the more you play these courses, the more you like it.

When the grandstands are packed around the first and eighteenth in front of such appreciative fans, it's like being royalty driving up a crowd-lined street.

It's easy to wax lyrical on such occasions, but I don't know of anything to compare with a St. Andrews Open, and the course is at the heart of the whole scenario. Architecturally, it's a magnificent layout, but it doesn't show its true character unless the wind blows.

Like most links courses, it is built with the wind in mind. With only two par-threes and two par-fives, it's a difficult test in the wind. But, in easier conditions, the par 72 was certain to be beaten by many players.

There are certain pundits who maintain that the way to play the old course is to hit left all the time. But that doesn't necessarily ring true. Like many links, the premium is on shot placement because the bunkers are so well set out.

And when you remember there are more than 160 traps on the old course, that's a mighty lot of sand. You've got to be one hell of a player, or have the greatest good fortune to avoid them all in a round, let alone throughout a tournament like the Open.

Some players like to play down the right and that means flirting with the gorse and bunkers going out and with the out-of-bounds on the majority of the homeward holes. But, on that route, you get the better shots into the play. As dry as Scotland was, a lot of the players were hitting the ball down the left with a lot of roll. This allowed them to hit lofted shots into the greens over bunkers and more bunkers.

But, even then, it isn't plain sailing, simply because the greens at St. Andrews are far from easy. Take the twelfth, for instance. It's only 312 yards long, but it would be folly to think it was a simple task.

One thing you **don't** want to do is drive straight down the middle because four troublesome bunkers are ready to trap you. The best route is to play right, parallel with the River Eden, to the most generous part of the fairway. But, from there, you're hitting to the narrowest part of the green. Making things even more difficult is a ridge running across the putting surface, and the pin is invariably somewhere along that ridge. So your second shot requires the maximum of skill and touch to finish near the flag for any birdie opportunity.

I could go on and on about both the British Open and St. Andrews. I have just scratched the surface of what was a fantastic trip. Every person working in the golf profession should try and attend the Open to not only compare the playing conditions, but also compare the architecture. I believe that the first visit to a links course would give everyone a new prospective into what I will call "American Golf Course Design" compared to the "Scottish Golf Course Design". There are great differences in both aspects as I am sure most people observed while watching the open on television.

WHITHER THE WEATHER?

(Sequel to article in July, 1984 issue of The Bull Sheet)

by Paul M. Alexander, Ph.D.
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The one consistent thing about Mother Nature is her inconsistency. For over 30 years, I have yearned for that elusive "perfect growing season", only to be disappointed year after year. Admittedly, some years have been better than others, but the spring and summer of 1983 just about set an all-time low for adverse growing conditions for turf, trees and ornamentals. Then came the spring and early summer of 1984!

In my travels throughout the east, south and mid-west areas of the country this year, I have been told that spring was practically non-existent. Seems as though we went from winter to summer and this wreaked havoc with the health and growth of both turf and ornamentals.

As July ended, many of our franchise people throughout the country reported on the weather of the previous two months. June was very wet (up to 16" of rainfall in some areas) and unseasonable cool. July, in many areas, was hot and dry for the first 3 weeks, then the rains and very cool weather set in. In the Atlanta area, however, the reverse was true — an all-time hot spell and drought occurred in June, and July ushered in very cool, wet weather.

What has all of the foregoing to do with our work? As turf management professionals, you already know. When Mother Nature acts in such a capricious manner, living plants (and other organisms) have no choice but to react accordingly.

In hot, dry weather, our cool-season turf tends to go dormant, certain weeds and insects grow and multiply, **and** the golfers continue to play. For those of you who experienced the cool, wet weather, certain other problems arose — that same grass grew rapidly (whether you could mow or not) and, if it was too wet, the root systems shortened up because of oxygen depletion — **and** the golfers continued to play.

Surely, these are conditions that test the abilities and capabilities of all golf course superintedents, but the truly professional people invariably come through. They may not be able to control the weather (or golfer traffic), but they can control certain agronomic practices such as irrigation (time and amount), mowing (height, frequency, etc.), fertilization (timing, rates and type), pest control (diseases, weeds and insects), thatch control and aerification.

I am hoping that the remainder of 1984 will be kind to all of us and that Mother Nature will relent a little bit so that our turf, trees and ornamentals can recover from the extremely bad weather of the past 12 to 14 months. Best of luck to all of you!