

SAVVY SUPERINTENDENT



As the British Open approaches, all eyes in golf focus on the British Isles. A key "player" is Michael F. Bonallack, OBE, secretary of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews since 1983 and one of Britain's all-time amateur golf champions. He received the Donald Ross Award from the ASGCA in 1991. Bonallack, 60, received the Bobby Jones Award for distinguished sportsmanship in golf in 1972. Chairman of the Golf Foundation from 1977 to 1983, he also served as chairman of the Professional Golfers' Association Board of Management from 1976 to 1982, and president of the English Golf Union in 1982.

On Aug. 23 the NEC World Series of Golf will honor him as Ambassador of Golf. Every year since 1981 the tournament has honored someone who has "fostered the ideals of the game on an international level and whose concern for others extends

R&A's Secretary Bonallack in an Open state of mind

beyond the golf course." Contribution editor Terry Buchen recently conducted the following interview with him.

Golf Course News: What are your duties as R&A secretary?

Michael Bonallack: I am responsible for the day-to-day operation of the R&A ensuring that policies laid down by the General Committee are carried out by the Secretariat and Staff. This concerns both our role as a private members' golf club here in St. Andrews and as the governing authority for the Rules of Golf and Amateur Status and the organizers of various championships including the Open.

GCN: What is the procedure for selecting the course rotation for The Open Championship?

MB: There is no set course rotation for the Open Championship. There are, in fact, nine courses which we use from time to time, although we do try to bring the Championship back to St. Andrews more often than we do to other venues.

GCN: Who visits the head greenkeeper prior to The Open to make observations and recommendations? Are there specific specifications as to mowing heights, fairway widths, etc. for him to follow?

MB: We employ a consultant agronomist who visits all nine courses on the Championship rotation and who has regular meetings with the head greenkeeper at

each course. In the year prior to the Open, the chairman of the Championship Committee and I make visits to the championship venue and discuss with them the width of fairways and the height of rough. However, generally speaking, on seaside links courses the width of fairways is governed by the bunkering and it is not normally necessary to grow much rough since this is put there by nature.

We do not specifically lay down mowing heights for the fairways or greens. But, as a general rule, we suggest greens run at approximately 9 1/2 on the Stimp meter which is quite fast enough for links courses, especially if the wind is blowing.

GCN: I found it fascinating that courses on The Open rotation have automatic irrigation systems. Why is that?

MB: Irrigation systems were put in on the Open courses, not to make the course green, but just to make sure that during periods of drought there is sufficient water there to keep the course alive. Indeed, not all the Championship courses have full irrigation systems. In fact, Muirfield has no water on the fairways. If they need sprinklers, they have to be connected around the greens.

GCN: What are your philosophies for course set-up for The Open?

MB: Because of the natural features of links courses, the policy of setting up a course for the Open Championship is to have firm, fast fairways. Pins are sited in positions which mean only a drive in the right place will give the player a chance of getting near the hole with his second shot.

GCN: Are courses on The Open rotation changed very much, architecturally or agronomically, the next time that each individual course hosts the championship? If so, how might they change?

MB: The courses have changed very little as far as architectural layout is concerned, although the last two years we found it necessary to have all the greens at Royal Birkdale relaid because of problems with the soil and drainage. We took this opportunity to have the contours of the greens reshaped.

GCN: Is there anything different in store for the 124th Open at St. Andrews this year?

MB: The course will be exactly the same for the '95 Open Championship as it was for the one in 1990. It would almost need an Act of Parliament to make any changes.

GCN: During a typical Open, what are the major concerns of players and how are they handled?

MB: The main issues are the condition of the golf course, the way in which rulings are given, practice facilities, accommodation and transportation. All are handled by our offices. Committee members accompany each group of players to ensure decisions are given promptly.

GCN: How much time do you personally spend on the Rules of Golf administration? How long do the rules meetings, held every four years, usually last with the USGA?

MB: I do not become personally involved with any of the Rules of Golf meetings. We have a separate secretary who is responsible for the Rules of Golf Committee as well as the Amateur Status Committee. The meetings with the USGA are ongoing. As soon as one four-year cycle is finished, the joint committees start



Michael Bonallack

considering changes for the next cycle.

Generally there is one meeting per year between the joint committees. The final meeting, which lasts two or three days, is held approximately nine months before the new rule book comes into effect.

GCN: What is the hardest part about operating The Open?

MB: One of the biggest problems is adapting the tented village to fit the different venues. All of them vary in the amount of space available. Accommodations are also becoming an increasing headache because of the large numbers of players and overseas visitors that want to come to The Open.

GCN: What is the most fun about operating The Open?

MB: We always regard operating our championships as something which gives pleasure to us and our staff. One of the best things is the final champagne party for the winner. That is the first time everybody can relax, knowing the Open has hopefully been a great success.

GCN: What is the hardest part of your job?

MB: I am fortunate to have a very capable staff which makes my job seem very easy.

GCN: What is the greatest satisfaction you receive as secretary of the R&A?

MB: One is for all the championships to go well. It is also satisfying to know the financial success of The Open enables us to give grants to develop golf in many parts of the world and provide coaching for hundreds of young players.

GCN: What is the funniest thing you can remember happening during The Open?

MB: When we played at St. Andrews in 1984, the BBC carried out a very detailed survey of the course in early March to determine how many camera positions they needed and where they would be. They were therefore not very pleased when I sent out a press release saying the Championship Committee had decided to revert to the traditional course for The Open, which meant it would be played backwards, as it was before the turn of the century. I went on to describe the course going from the 1st tee to the 17th green, the 18th tee to the 16th green, and so on. The BBC producer was on the phone within minutes of receiving the press release and called me every name he could lay his hands on for a good two or three minutes before I pointed out to him that the date of the press release was April 1. We are still friends.

GCN: Do you visit with the players after The Open and listen to their recommendations? What course of action do you take?

MB: We are always pleased to receive suggestions from players as to possible improvements and we certainly take note of them. If they are sensible we will do our best to implement them. For instance, there used to be no facilities for the children of players and we now have a creche [children's nursery]. The practice facilities have improved in accordance with their wishes, and we consulted a number of players on a playoff format before deciding on four or five holes as opposed to either sudden death or an additional day. There are many others.



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