

HOW DOES MY COURSE GET READY FOR THE NEW SEASON?

There's no one size fits all when it comes to preparing a course for the start of club competitions. It actually depends on all sorts of different factors, as Steve Carroll discovers

THAT first weekend in April is a special time for many golfers.

Some of us might be getting the clubs out of the garage for the first time since the winter nights drew in, some of us might have been watching for those initial signs of spring with a keen eye.

But when that day dawns and the new competition season finally gets under way, who can fail to be inspired by the

sight of a freshly mown medal tee and a well hit shot onto a lovely green?

Have you ever stopped to wonder how that happens? What do greenkeeping teams go through – during the harshest conditions of winter – to make sure everything is as ready as can be for that first fixture of the year?

We asked the course managers at four very diverse layouts – parkland, heathland, links and downland – to explain how they went about the job.





A **DAM** Matthews sits in his office pondering as he pores over charts and fixtures. The Moor Allerton course manager is in the hands of Mother Nature when it comes to preparing a course for the new season – and he’s well aware of it.

“We will get a course ready, and we will get people out playing and we’ll try to get the greens renovation done early doors, but you are relying a little bit on soil temperatures to get the recovery.

“Each year is different. Last year, we had a bit of a false dawn. We got out early, got the renovation done, and it was brilliant. Then we had three weeks of completely freezing cold, dry weather and it just stumped us.”

Moor Allerton sits on heavy clay soil and so while some other courses can dive headlong into their spring programmes earlier, Matthews can still be waiting for his soil to dry out and the temperatures to rise well into the spring. All of which can cause delays.

THE PARKLAND

He adds: “You are really waiting for soil temperatures to come up to double figures before you go and chuck all your fertiliser on. You want to get that on, get everything going and push that growth. Then you can get out and start cutting, get your shaping done and your different types of grasses growing.

“That probably won’t happen until the middle of April, so the season is already going. If you start to look at feeding in the middle of April you’ve then got two or three weeks until things really start kicking in.

“So the middle of May is probably when we’re looking at saying ‘we’re in full cutting cycle and ready to go and prepare the course properly’.”

That should be an eye-opener for any golfers who turn up in April and wonder why the perfect course they’ve watched on the TV isn’t what they see in northern England. But the planning, to realise what members see then, goes back into the previous autumn.

Matthews spends hours in budget meetings, sorting out finances with committee chiefs, before building his programme around what he has to play with.

“It’s a good six weeks of intensive office planning work,” he explains. “Then you are relying on the spring giving you a hand for those plans to fall into place.

“There’s a lot we can do now. There’s better technology, the guys are better educated and there’s better products.

“But the big thing, for the spring, is getting that renovation work done.”

This year brings an extra challenge, as the club is hosting a EuroPro Tour qualifying event at the end of March. That means bringing the programme forward to produce a tournament-standard course for professionals - with spring having barely begun. Can he do it?

Matthews confesses: “The greens will be good, and the tees will be fine, but then you are in the lap of the gods as to what you can get out and do elsewhere.

“We’ll hold off the pre-season renovation work until after that event, which changes the way we’ll look after the greens through the winter. We’ll use different machinery – trying to keep things as firm as we can going into that event. We’ll do a bit more top dressing than we normally would and we’ll cut and iron the greens a lot more.”



WHAT I hear a lot is members saying 'well, you'll always be a couple of weeks behind here'. That's about as scientific as it gets," says Walton Heath course manager Michael Mann.

"I live in Chertsey, which is a 25 minute drive away. It's pretty much a steady drive all the way uphill and the temperature gauge in my car might be two or three degrees colder by the time I get up (to Walton Heath).

"We sit 190 metres above sea level and the site itself is very open and exposed. You get the wind blowing and it is quite a harsh environment.

"People might start to notice the grass verges growing down in Epsom, for example, but then when they get to Walton Heath there might still be snow lying on the ground.

"When we get snow up here, it tends to hang around. But you can drive a couple of miles down the road and there will just be nothing. It's quite a unique position up on the north downs."

Walton Heath is on every golfer's bucket list. The wonderful heathland layouts, the Old and New, both feature strongly in top 100 lists.

The club will host the British Masters in the autumn – another notch to a fine heritage that stretches back more than a century.

Close to the M25, and surrounded by trees, you would think there's plenty of shelter. But in fact the open heathland, combined with the elevation, brings a wind chill factor and makes temperatures a couple of degrees colder.

That can bring challenges in the New Year when Mann and his team start to prepare for that April D-Day.

"Our spring renovations are generally in March," he says. "What might happen is that, if you get a cold and dry period, you may get no growth on the greens. You may get very little recovery.

"So we have to be mindful that we might not get the recovery we want.

"We tend to do fairly non-aggressive spring maintenance and keep the aggressive stuff for August when we know we get the recovery.

"The composition of the greens – there are all sorts of grass out there. There's bits of Yorkshire Fog. There are



all sorts in the greens but they roll well, and that's the main thing.

"But what can happen is you get different grasses growing at different rates when you come into the spring.

"The bent grass might start to kick into life and start to grow but the meadowgrass – the poa – is sitting there doing nothing.

"So you get uneven surfaces and throwing fertiliser at it – to try and kick things on – is a waste of time really because the grass is dormant.

"You might have bumpy greens for a period going into spring until you get consistent growth across the whole surface."

Mann aims to have his winter projects in the books towards the tail of February, leaving the end of the month, and March, to concentrate on presentation before the growth finally arrives.

Before then, while the work is ongoing, the emphasis is on protection.

"Through the winter, you may take height of cuts up on greens. We have got greens that are over 100 years old and need a certain type of looking after.

"It's making sure wet areas are not getting mown consistently. You might miss areas, use hand mowers or

take heights of cut up.

"You sacrifice green speed a little but the most important thing for me is to have coverage on the greens coming into spring so that once the growth does kick in you've got something to work with.

"It's trying to avoid bare areas on greens, basically. It can be tempting to carry on mowing at low heights, really shaving things through the winter, to try and keep standards up."

Key to the whole exercise, Mann believes, is keeping golfers up to date with how the winter is progressing and being ahead of the curve in getting ready.

"We've got a reasonable sized staff to cope with most things.

"But I think it is about being proactive in your management - making sure you are protecting at the right times, making sure you're pushing at the right times.

"It is patience, sometimes, coming into spring and communication is important with members. It's always good to inform them of anything – good, bad and ugly so there are no surprises for them.

"In my mind, I need – come February and March – to make sure everything is in place so when the growth does come it's a case of presentation and touching things up."



THE HEATHLAND

MAGINE a season that never really stops.

“I try and keep out the summer furniture all year round because I want people to come here. If they are coming all the way from London, from a clay parkland course to come and play our course, I want them to feel like it is summer,” said James Bledge, whose drive towards April is utterly different to any other type of layout you might play.

A true links, on pure sand, Royal Cinque Ports’ course manager isn’t “fire-fighting” when the spring starts to poke its head above the parapet.

It’s not muddy. The team isn’t running round repairing walkways. The only things you might notice on a trip to Deal, to give you a clue that you might be in winter, is the roping and traffic

management to stop areas getting worn.

And, of course, the temperatures.

“We don’t have to do as much hardcore thatch management in the autumn or the spring,” Bledge says. “Parklands and heathland have got the big machinery out, we are very subtle with ours. We will just keep applying six to 11-tonne top dressing to dilute thatch. There’s very little disruption, to be honest with you. But people treat this as the summer and I like to treat it as the summer.

“That’s maybe why links courses have got this reputation. You’ll often see a lot of parkland courses have got their old plastic hole cups out and their thin pins and their worn flags. I try to keep the attitude for as summery a feel as possible.”

You might think that a coastal location, and the



harsh sea air, would cause some problems but a sea wall, built in the 1970s, keeps the salt at bay.

Bledge adds: "If we have a long spell of northerly wind, then the wind is a problem to get growth going in the spring. For that reason, I have sown some bent grass into the greens this year – some Arrowtown fine bents – just so we've got a better cover coming into the spring."

"We don't seem to lose grass cover and have too much of a problem with a lack of growth," he continues. "Actually, it works the other way. We've got some bad grass in the greens. We've got Yorkshire Fog and, during the winter, that thins out and we can keep speeds up just as easily."

That summer feel pervades everything Bledge's team will do. Mats are avoided if possible. With a

fairway renovation to remove unwanted grass types having been done, and grown back in time for Christmas, players might have to drop in the rough in three or four roped off areas. That's it.

So what's there to do as the season approaches?

"We focus on colour and, if we are coming out of a harsh winter, we'll spray some iron. It's more – turf grass-wise – about using preventative fungicides to make sure, at the start of the winter and the back-end of the autumn, we don't get any disease that will lead to scarring. Otherwise we'd be on the back foot all winter and chasing our tails. That's a big thing. This winter there was a big focus on deep aeration and sanding. I don't layer the sand on, it's little and often. I am very pro-aeration and top dressing throughout the season as well."



THE LINKS



THE DOWNLAND

OCTOBER, November, December – three months where we are probably thinking of anything but the start of the next golfing year.

But if Temple course manager Ben Kebby wants his chalk downland course to be ready for the dawn of a new season, it's the autumn that is absolutely crucial.

"The most difficult time for us is October through to December because we start our winter projects in October," he explains.

"The team goes down to winter work hours – it's nine hours a day in the summer and seven in the winter.

"We have got leaves falling and the grass is still growing.

"So we are trying to do far more from October to December than we did in the summer period but with fewer man hours and the additional leaf clearance and construction work. Then, when we get into January, we've got our woodlands work that lasts from January to March.

"All of a sudden, it's March aeration and we are into the season again."

Two other pressing issues make life harder for Kebby.

"The members have qualifying competitions all year round. We cannot put hole stabilisers in the greens. We have to change holes more than we would actually like to – to make sure the holes are crisp all the way through.

"We have to use our medal tees so we don't lose that yardage across the course and make them non-qualifying competitions.

"You would like the main medal tees closed for the winter, so they are perfect come April. We can't do that.

"What makes it even harder for our site is that we are north facing. We don't get warm, or see true growth, up until late May. That's where we are actually feeling that the soil temperatures are high and we are getting growth daily and we are back into our cutting programme.

"We have to be really careful to make sure the course doesn't get too torn up through the winter, because it will then take until June to repair.

"The most important time, from a fertility point of view, is October through until December.

"We make sure that all surfaces across the course are healthy going into winter – they all have full coverage.

"So when we get into December, we've put the fertility programme in place to make sure we have got full



coverage for the wear and tear.”

Being a downland course also proves a double-edged sword. While it drains particularly well, and Kebby won't be dealing with standing water, those superb conditions prove a magnet for visiting golfers.

So the increased green fees bring challenges if the course is to get into April intact.

“What we see is damage through wheeled vehicles,” Kebby says. “We have to control wear and tear with ropes and posts and these go out really early – in October. We know that because we stay open, when others are closed around us, the golfers will migrate to us to play.

“We get an increased amount of play against other clay-based parkland courses, which then can cause more wear than we would get if it was just members.”

Add in the prospect of disease – “the pressure has been as much as I've ever known” Kebby says of last autumn – and what you get is a greenkeeping tightrope.

“If we do not control the scarring before Christmas then we will see that in March and it won't be fully repaired until possibly April. We are really on the edge of our limit. The important time for us is our October through to December period.” ❀

MOOR ALLERTON

The Leeds club was founded in 1923 but moved to its current 27-hole complex, designed by Robert Trent Jones Senior, in 1970.

Former Ryder Cup players Howard Clark and Peter Alliss, the voice of golf, have both been attached to Moor Allerton.

They aren't the only famous faces to have walked the fairways, either. The European Tour was once a regular visitor and Seve Ballesteros, Greg Norman and Nick Faldo are among the greats that have played it.

WALTON HEATH

The host of this year's British Masters, the Surrey club was founded in 1903 and consists of two courses – the Old and the New.

Both were designed by Herbert Fowler and the heathland club can look back at four prime ministers as members – David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Andrew Bonar Law and Arthur Balfour.

The club played host to arguably the greatest Ryder Cup team of all time in 1981 when an American outfit containing 11 major champions hammered Europe 18.5-9.5.

ROYAL CINQUE PORTS

Two Opens, in 1909 and 1920, have been held on this Kent links, which got its name from Deal's membership of an ancient group of trading towns granted special privileges by English kings.

Founded in 1892, the championship course is regarded as one of the finest of its type and continues to stage the largest true amateur tournament in the world – the Halford Hewitt Public Schools Championship. Sixty-four schools currently take part.

Royal Cinque Ports' two Opens were won by JH Taylor and George Duncan.

TEMPLE

Twice Open champion Willie Park Jr is responsible for this 'inland links' in Berkshire, which was founded in 1909.

Temple is built on land once owned by the Knights Templar, the famous warriors during the Crusades, and three-time Open champion Sir Henry Cotton was appointed professional in 1954. The chalk downland course is set out over the picturesque Thames Valley.