

# Corinthian Club's revolution against the traditions of golf



One of the two tier artificial greens set into the tree lined fairway at the Corinthian Club at Fawkham, Kent. This nine holer is Europe's first synthetic surface to be recognised as an accepted golf course with a measured standard scratch.

Standby with the smelling salts, rush in the cardiac resuscitation equipment, some of our greenkeepers, elderly golfers and a few green chairmen are about to suffer a severe bout of apoplexy!

You are about to hear of a 'Synthetic Golf Course'. Not just a plastic mat or a nylon walkway to the first tee, but a full nine holes of artificial turf in the place where it matters - the tees and greens.

The perpetrators of this dastardly act are the owners of the Corinthian Sports Club, a private enterprise business at Fawkham, set amid the tranquility of the Kent countryside, some ten miles or so from the Dartford Tunnel.

The Billings family, who developed the sporting complex in the 1970's, already have a football team in the semi-professional Southern League. Their training facilities include a fine indoor pitch and outside the club-house, there is an all grass ground plus a full size synthetic training pitch.



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Twenty-five year old Andrew Billings, not only holds his place in the football team, but as a golfer his handicap will be single figures once the course has been approved and given a standard scratch by the Kent Union. Indications are that this will be official within weeks.

The Billings are renowned for their enterprise, enthusiasm and independence, so perhaps it was natural for them to step outside the bounds of convention and develop a golf course on the rolling, woodlined pastures, by being the first to build in synthetics. Why did you do it? Andrew was asked. "We already had a good synthetic football pitch", he replied, "and it seemed like a good idea!" "No one else had done it, the maintenance appeared minimal and the cost at £15,000 a green was not much more than building conventional sand greens".

The company they chose to install the polypropylene putting surfaces, was Saker Leisure of Wickhamford, Evesham, Worcester, whose director Tony Talbot, is deeply involved in the running of Worcester County Cricket Club. He is regarded as an expert with artificial wickets.

For those ornithologists who might wonder why a Saker, a bird of prey, was chosen as the name and mast-head of the company, prompts the retelling of an interesting story. The firm was approached by a falconer who asked if they could supply a piece of artificial grass plyable enough to wrap round a perching post. Why? His bird, a Saker falcon had taken a fancy to either the feel of turf or the colour green, hence the name, and another satisfied customer. It also cured the bird's distress caused by talon rot, when it perched on the bare wood.

Before discussing the construction and merits of artificial surfaces it should be firmly established this is no 'Mickey Mouse' golf course, though a number of those invited to the official opening had their suspicions when they heard the ceremony was to be conducted by Mickey Walker, twice the British Women's Amateur Champion, a member of the WPGA tour and now the professional at the Warren Club, near Maldon in Essex.

Although only nine holes, there are two par fives, five fours and two threes. The fairways and rough are all as natural as God intended and so are the scrub, brambles and pine trees, as many who played the course found to their cost.

From an opening dog-leg to a plateau green, guarded by sunken bunkers, the course becomes progressively more difficult. The second and ninth have the green at the end of a long narrow avenue of pine trees, needing a six or seven iron to find the putting surface. Both suitable candidates for a picture on that nightmare golf calendar with greens in canyons, up mountains or on tiny islands in the midst of a vast lake.

After the official opening when Miss Walker cut the mandatory tape, ably assisted by Kent and England wicketkeeper Alan Knott, those who wished formed into teams to play the course. Well - having driven 220 miles and just by chance having a bag of clubs and a pair of shoes in the boot of my car - why not?

The tees, if one is permitted to be critical are a trifle too small, There is also a problem with tee pegs breaking off in the half dozen holes provided, but this is a fault receiving the attention of the constructors and can be simply rectified.

The greens were without doubt as big as if not bigger than those at your average golf club. The carpet of tufted polypropylene of British manufacture is laid on a stone base. Small stones, rather like the gravel chippings used to tarmac a road but more symmetrical, are laid on the excavated and contoured green area, with a drainage system below.

Putting can be best described as 'interesting'. It is no billiard table top. The ball runs true, though a bit wobbly. Short putts are definitely down to the skill of the golfer, those over twenty feet are very difficult because of the subtle borrows and the problems of reading pace.

Mickey Walker, fine golfer that she is, found stopping a shot to the pin virtually impossible despite the degree of backspin the top professionals impart, but it was not long before she adapted her game to pitching the front edge and running up.

Is there a place for artificial greens in British golf? The answer must be - Yes. To be perfectly honest, I would not like to see them on my home course, but synthetic tees during the winter would be a distinct advantage to playing off a churned up mud surface, particularly on the short

holes. This is not the place to debate why mud patches seem to be part and parcel of winter golf, suffice it to say they are and this is one way they can be eliminated.

Phil Talbot a family director of Saker Leisure admits the developments in the technology of artificial surfaces is moving at such a pace improvements can almost be measured on a daily basis. The next course he constructs will be even better.

There is perhaps a misconception that once the green has been built nothing more needs to be done, but this is far from the truth. The incursion of moss requires treatment, the surface should be brushed, preferably with a mechanical sweeper to remove tufts of grass from the fairways, leaves and other debris and the surface would also benefit from a regular top dressing of sand.

Nevertheless the concept has proved, artificials are here to stay. There will be others who will look at the Corinthian project with interest and it will not be long before private enterprise and the local authorities will be seriously considering this method of golf course construction as a viable alternative to grass.

Blood pressure still rising?

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