

Out·On·The·Course

Chris Kennedy

Chris Kennedy is the course manager at Hags Castle Golf Club—the recent venue for the multi-sponsored Glasgow Open. Chris talks to John Campbell.

“Not every schoolboy achieves his ambition, as I did,” Chris Kennedy said. Chris, 36, is the course manager at Hags Castle GC, near Glasgow. “I came into greenkeeping through my interest in golf. As a wee lad, I used to walk around the course with my father, who was a keen club golfer. When I was old enough, I became a junior member and had a single figure handicap by the age of 13. My prime ambition was to be a professional golfer.”

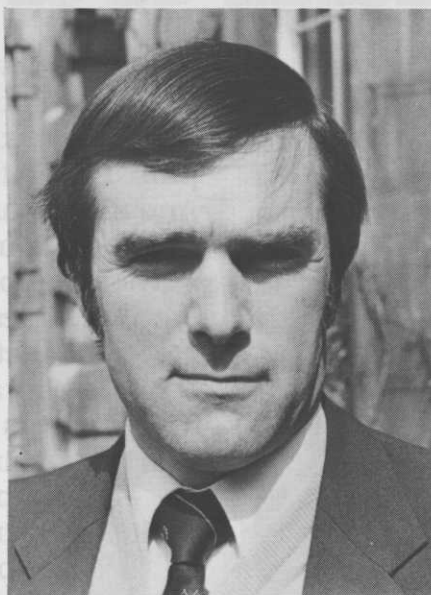
On leaving school, he went to work in the pro's shop at Cowglen, where he served under Jack Murray, an old greenkeeper/pro who gave him a good training and much wise counsel.

“He advised me to concentrate more on the art of greenkeeping, as well as being a good professional, for he felt that the greenkeeper would ultimately be the man in charge of the course,” Chris said. “Although things have not worked out that way so far, I think it must come eventually.”

Chris accepted the advice of his old mentor and found that he really enjoyed working on the course, which was more satisfying and offered him a healthy outdoor activity in congenial surroundings. He relished the constant challenge and the demand for a modest accumulation of experience and knowledge on a wide variety of trades, which every good greenkeeper must have.

Chris is serious and intelligent, well aware of all his responsibilities, number one of which is his family. “A happy and stable family life is important in our profession. I know of several broken marriages brought about by the pressures of being a course manager.”

With his wife Joan, he shares the affection of a bonny two-year-old daughter Suzanne. “After my early period at Cowglen, I was offered the course manager's job at Hags Castle, where I worked with head greenkeeper Tommy Wemyss, who had 40 years in the business. Tommy was a likeable and charming man who taught me a great deal about golf



course management and many of the tips he passed on I still use to this day.

“When I first came to Hags Castle, there were three assistant greenkeepers and one apprentice. Now the strength of my team has increased to four assistants and two apprentices, due to a much higher volume of play and other demands.

“Nowadays, we have over 1,000 members, guests and golf societies using the facilities and we stage major professional tournaments. All of which adds up to a substantial volume of traffic over the course.

“We also have a very high standard of maintenance with wall-to-wall mowing on our parkland course, which involves a lot of time and labour.

“The frequency of our mowing programme entails a lot of work during the growing season to keep the place trim and tidy and being a popular venue on the fringe of the city, we get quite a lot of play which adds to the wear and tear.”

Unfortunately, the course also suffers from some vandalism—a problem that affects most clubs in major suburban areas.

“It's nice to go to places like St Andrews and Gleneagles where the

courses are respected and they don't have any such problems, but I have learned to live and cope with it.

“My advice to any greenkeeper on a course prone to this nuisance is to keep a good turf nursery with an ample stock of compost. Have all the staff well trained in the art of small turf repairs with edging irons, turf spades and patchers, so they can be dispatched to repair fine turf maliciously damaged at a moment's notice. Club members pay a lot for their golf and I like to keep the course trim and tidy at all times.

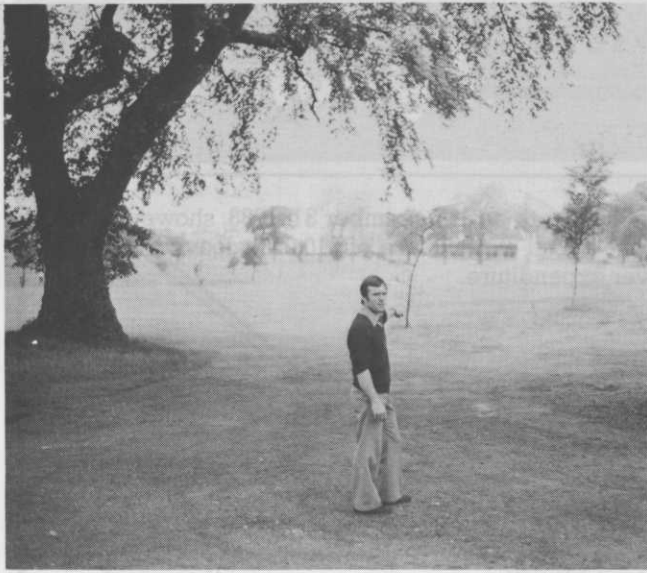
“I have always believed that any course manager is only as good as the staff he employs. I always respect my team and take an interest in their progress and am willing to listen to any constructive comments that might contribute to the smooth running of the work.

“Having good facilities, such as staff quarters, workshop and a storage area is important to their well-being. If they are treated like second-rate citizens, they lose interest and don't give of their best. If they can be encouraged to play golf, it's half the battle. They then begin to understand what course upkeep means from a player's point of view and this helps to break down a lot of barriers between club and staff.”

Chris believes that improvements in the types of aeration equipment over the years have made a vast difference to the standards of turf management. “We used to have the hollow tine forks in my early days. Then we upgraded to the Auto-turfman, then to the Ryan Greensaire and now we have a Cushman, which I consider to be a very useful piece of equipment.”

Chris is well aware of the pressures and the amount of work entailed in grooming the course for special occasions, having prepared his course for a number of international events.

Last month, Ken Brown enjoyed a runaway victory in the Glasgow Open at Hags Castle. The win, surprisingly Brown's first on British soil, was



Timber revetment does a first-class job of retaining ditch walls.



Chris indicates the site of some newly planted trees.

worth £13,330. The Glasgow public's support of the tournament was magnificent with over 27,000 watching the four days play at Hags Castle.

"The most valuable lesson I have learned in greenkeeping," Chris said, "is never put off until tomorrow what can be done today. The weather in this part of Scotland can change dramatically overnight and if there is work to be done and the equipment is available, then I prefer to get the job finished wherever possible. The weather might never be the same two days in succession.

"My advice to young greenkeepers is to try to achieve high standards in all phases of their work. When you play on a course where a poor job has been made of topdressing the greens, or the holes have been put in unfair positions, etc, and none of the work seems properly planned, it reflects the ability of the greenkeeping staff and

the reputation of the club.

"When composting greens, every effort should be made to do the work in methodical stages so there is minimum interference with play. Hole positions should be selected with due regard to the strategy of play and the levelness of the surface in the vicinity of the hole.

"Shoddy workmanship should never be tolerated in our business. Bad news travels fast and courses where the standard of upkeep is low soon get known among the golfing fraternity. Every effort should be made to cultivate the goodwill of all golfers, for they can be your greatest asset if they are on your side. If they build up resentment towards you, it may work to your disadvantage.

"Players tend to live for their round of golf and if they are not performing well they may find some reason to blame the course. In defence of greenkeepers, we are often used as an

excuse by players who don't have a great playing ability. But I don't think any greenkeeper should object to constructive criticism."

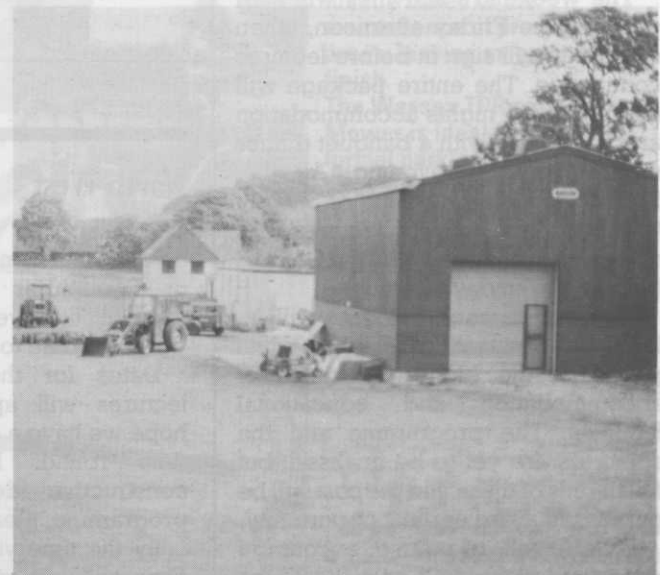
Chris Kennedy is a prominent member of SIGGA. He has served as chairman of the west section and the national association. His contribution to the administrative affairs has earned him the highest praise.

"We would all like to see an association of head greenkeepers and course managers embracing SIGGA, EIGGA and the BGGGA and this will only come about by the mutual agreement of all concerned," Chris added. "To achieve this objective, we must dispense with personalities and outdated ideas, which may be holding us back.

"We should look to the future and be prepared to progress in unity. I think the Scots would be willing to play their part in the establishment of such an international association."



Trees are an interesting feature of the course.



Hags Castle has a good range of maintenance sheds.