The finishing touches make all the difference...

A gamble pays off

Scott MacCallum visits Donaghadee Golf Club which has turned around its fortunes thanks to some brave decisions.
Three years ago Donaghadee Golf Club, near Bangor, in Northern Ireland, took a gamble.

Local man, Aaron Small, who had been number two at Clandeboye Golf Club for the previous 10 years, was quickly to honour its commitment fees; digger man fees, drainage, turf fees, £5,000 per hole covering all architect's fees, designer fees, drainage, turf etc. I really enjoy working with Howard because he is on site the whole time and can make amends as we go rather than him leaving plans for us to interpret.”

To describe a Swan bunker, Aaron explains that they fit in well to the landscape and that they are built in proportion to the scale of the golf course.

“Visually they look excellent but they do require a bit of maintenance as they need to be hand raked.”

While this has been going on, other areas of the course haven’t been neglected and have seen an upgrade.

“We’ve improved the signage and made money,” explained Aaron.

“We bought some excellent signs from Eagle Promotions which have been cemented in. They are wooden and have a map of the hole painted on them and look great. We get them sponsored for an average of around £500 each for two years – more for par-3s as they are studied for yardages more than others and the 1st is more as well. For the sponsorship we get 20 rounds at Donaghadee. This brings more people into the club to spend money at the club or in the shop so we benefit. “

“Category One golfers like them to be firm but harder handcappers like a bit softer and fluffier. But we’ve also got to contend with wind blow as well as the fact that some bunkers drain better than others. Then you’ve got to look at the fact that sun facing bunkers dry out more quickly, while those that are more in play will react differently to those that are not found so often. It is an impossible task to achieve total consistency.”

With the bunkers on track and due to be completed in another four visits, there is a steady improvement much to the delight of the members, despite the fact that it has made the course at least a shot tougher.

“The club knew that the course was behind the times so the nettle was grasped and money was spent.”

Aaron Small

70 bunkers which had been well received by the members and felt that Howard could make an impact at Donaghadee.

“I’d been in the club around six months before I approached them and suggested that we might Howard in to take a look and they agreed.”

Howard visited and the club agreed that he would look at two holes, the visually appealing par-3 13th and the 18th, the two holes that would make the biggest impact.

“The downhill 13th was a bit unbalanced with one bunker on the front, one on the right and another at the back. Now it looks like a real signature hole with bunkers surrounding the green. With the 18th it meant people left the course thinking what a good golf course it was. The club was over the moon and the decision to extend it to the rest of the bunkering was easy,” said Aaron, or “Bunker Boy” as some of the members call him.

After that a programme which involved Howard visiting twice in the year, in February and October for three days with two holes being done each time.

“The course is a little below average length wise and there is no way we can make it longer so really the only way we can improve the challenge is to tighten the course up with the bunkering and make sure they are in the correct places.

“We put £20,000 in the budget each year which worked out at £5,000 per hole covering all architect fees, designer fees, drainage, turf etc. I really enjoy working with Howard because he is on site the whole time and can make amends as we go rather than him leaving plans for us to interpret.”

To describe a Swan bunker, Aaron explains that they fit in well to the landscape and that they are built in proportion to the scale of the golf course.

“Visually they look excellent but they do require a bit of maintenance as they need to be hand raked.”

While this has been going on, other areas of the course haven’t been neglected and have seen an upgrade.

“We’ve improved the signage and made money,” explained Aaron.

“We bought some excellent signs from Eagle Promotions which have been cemented in. They are wooden and have a map of the hole painted on them and look great. We get them sponsored for an average of around £500 each for two years – more for par-3s as they are studied for yardages more than others and the 1st is more as well. For the sponsorship we get 20 rounds at Donaghadee. This brings more people into the club to spend money at the club or in the shop so we benefit. “

“Category One golfers like them to be firm but harder handcappers like a bit softer and fluffier. But we’ve also got to contend with wind blow as well as the fact that some bunkers drain better than others. Then you’ve got to look at the fact that sun facing bunkers dry out more quickly, while those that are more in play will react differently to those that are not found so often. It is an impossible task to achieve total consistency.”

With the bunkers on track and due to be completed in another four visits, there is a steady improvement much to the delight of the members, despite the fact that it has made the course at least a shot tougher.

“The club knew that the course was behind the times so the nettle was grasped and money was spent.”

Aaron Small
Three years ago Donaghadee team player had played the course a number of times but credit to the club, they appreciated that something needed to be done – the nettle was grasped and money spent. “I know, coming here, that it was going to be a challenge but certainly wasn’t daunted by it.” Aaron had been honest at his interview, highlighting where he thought the problems were, and that was music to the ears of the interview panel, who knew then that they’d get their man.

“I personally believe that the Head Greenkeeper needs to play golf otherwise it’s like a chef who doesn’t taste his own food. If I’d been a member of Donaghadee I wouldn’t have been happy and I could understand why they were leashing,” said Aaron, a 4 handicap who hits the ball a country mile.

The first thing he did when he started was, as with most new men, turn the greens around, and the club was quick to honour its commitment with around £80,000 worth of new machinery, which has since been added to by another £70,000 worth of kit.

“Before I started they had one guy stuck on a three unit rough mower and it took him a full week to cut the rough. We now have a seven unit Toro and we get the work done in a day and a half. We were immediately saving three and a half days’ worth of wages each week which meant that the machine basically paid itself off and we got a better quality finish,” said Aaron, who couldn’t believe how busy the course was when he arrived.

“Thought it must have been Open week as we regularly have 600 people out between Friday and Sunday and I’d been used to Clandeboye, which had two courses to swallow up the golfers.”

“The greens are our bread and butter. I took out about 210 boxes of thatch and sanded them straight away to get them running true. It was the best thing for them.”

Having made an impact on the greens and added definition to the fairways Aaron then turned his attention to the bunkers.

“I was grubbing a greenside bunker on the 4th when the Captain came over. I pulled the hand grubber through the first time and it was HS Masters sand, I pulled it through again and it was Wendover White. The third time it was Silica. So basically there had been a problem with the Silica sand so instead of digging it out the Wendover had been put on top and when there was a problem with that the HS was put on top of that. It was good for the Captain to see what we were up to.”

Aaron had worked with architect Howard Swan, at Clandeboye on and the decision to extend it to the rest of the bunkering was easy,” said Aaron, or “Bunker Boy” as some of the members call him.

After that a programme which involved Howard visiting twice in the year, in February and October for three days with two holes being done each time.

“The course is a little below average length wise and there is no way we can make it longer so really the only way we can improve the challenge is to tighten the course up with the bunkering and make sure they are in the correct places.

“We put £20,000 in the budget each year which worked out at £5,000 per hole covering all architecture fees, digger man fees, drainage, sand etc. I really enjoy working with Howard because he is on site the whole time and can make amends as we go rather than him leaving plans for us to interpret.”

Asked to describe a Swan bunker Aaron explains that they fit in well to the landscape and that they are built in proportion to the scale of the golf course.

“Visually they look excellent but they do require a bit of maintenance as they need to be hand raked.”

Aaron firmly believes that bunkers are the toughest element of a golf course to get right and that it is certainly harder to get bunkers consistency right than it is green consistency.

“Category One golfers like them to be firm but handier handcappers like a bit softer and fluffier. But we’re also got to contend with wind blow as well as the fact that some bunkers drain better than others. Then you’ve got to look at the fact that sun facing bunkers dry out more quickly, while those that are more in play will react differently to those that are not found so often. It is an impossible task to achieve total consistency.”

With the bunkers on track and due to be completed in another four visits, there is a steady improvement much to the delight of the members, despite the fact that it has made the course at least a shot tougher.

While this has been going on, other areas of the course haven’t been neglected and have seen an upgrade.

“We’ve improved the signage and made money,” explained Aaron.

“We bought some excellent signs from Eagle Promotions which have been cemented in. They are wooden and have a map of the hole painted on them and look great. We get them sponsored for an average of around £500 each for two years – more for par-3s as they are studied for yardages more often than the 1st is more as well. For the sponsorship we get 20 rounds at Donaghadee. This brings more people into the club to spend money at the club or in the shop so we benefit

Howard Swan’s Short-Course Plan

“Above and Below: The new bunkers

GI 19
You can play it as a six hole or a nine hole course,” said Aaron, who added that the project was given funding by Sport Northern Ireland.

“There were strict tight deadlines for every stage of the project which, if missed, would have caused the funding to be withdrawn but we met every one.”

“The new area will be administered by the Pro Shop, with a booking system ensuring that there are not too many people on it at any one time, and schools will be invited to bring enthusiastic children to the area to receive lessons from the professionals and hopefully ultimately become members.

“It will also be a great warm up for those with a later tee time and we will have matches for the various groups within the club – juniors, ladies, seniors etc. It will help to bring the club closer together while sharpening up our short games, and let me get on with it which is important enough to support us in this way,” said Howard.

“It was a very poor area, the size of a football pitch and you very rarely saw more than a couple of people on it at any one time.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t such a gamble after all for Donaghadee Golf Club,” said Howard.

“It seems to me that many, many golf clubs do not make good use of their practice facilities, however comprehensive they might be, and much comes down to the fundamental philosophy of the club to see new blood coming into the game. Donaghadee has been very enterprising in looking at this innovative approach to swell their membership, both adult and junior, and they have been very successful indeed in doing this on both counts,” he explained.

With the new short game facility to manage, which requires hand mowing of the greens, Aaron operates with a team of six including himself with summer help bringing the number to seven.

“I’m over the moon at the way things have worked out and delighted at the way the club has supported me. They gave me the job and let me get on with it which is exactly the way to a successful club.

“Pay the professionals to get on with the job,” said Aaron.

Perhaps it wasn’t such a gamble after all for Donaghadee Golf Club.