A continental approach

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When I arrived at GC Schmallenberg, two hours from Dusseldorf and not too far from the German-Dutch border, the scene which greeted me was not something you’d expect to see at a typical British members’ club.

Just outside the Club Shop the sister of Christiane Rotig, the Club Manager, was leading a couple of the lady members in an exercise class. As the music rang out the three were joined by Norbert Hahn, the Chairman of Greens, for some lunges and stretches.

As I say, not something you’d often see at a British club but it is indicative of the less stuffy approach there is to golf in Germany, and in particular GC Schmallenberg.

There is a warm and relaxed approach, which is something Head Greenkeeper, Denis Tweddell, has appreciated since he joined the club at the beginning of March last year.

“Everyone made me incredibly welcome. One of the guys, Charly Klauke, is a key player on the construction team and “is a wizard on a mini digger” with 18 years at Schmallenberg while they also have seasonal support from Franz Curdes, a farmer who sold the club the land on which the back nine was built. Schmallenberg, is 400 metres above sea level, and is in a skiing area affectionately known as the Dutch Alps, is generally buried beneath snow from mid-December until mid to late February and initially he was keen to learn how best to protect the course during this time.

“I talked with the guys here who had experienced the snow and they told me that we needed to spray a preventative as close to the start of the snow fall as possible.

“What I’ve found is that it seems to be important that the ground is frozen before the snow comes because if it isn’t, and there is heat in the ground, you do get more disease.”

Denis admitted that there was “fuss and panic when they came out of hibernation and that, due to the unexpected early arrival of the snow, there was only a slight snowfall last year, there was slightly more usual, but that the language was vital and has helped me integrate much more quickly,” said Denis, who revealed that watching the German version of Come Dine with Me had done much to improve the family’s skills in the kitchen.

“People have done so much to help us settle in. The members have been welcoming and I’ve met up with some other expats.”

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“The work also coincided with a hot drought spell last June so we could use the time we would have spent cutting fairways and tees.”

All in all it added significantly to the overall maximum length of the course and created some monster holes. The par 5 610, for example, is uphill and into the prevailing wind is now over 600 yards from the tees, while there are several other holes over 500 yards long, testing
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“Everyone made me incredibly welcome. One of the guys, Charly Hennemann, who is our tree and plant specialist, even decorated our flat for us – I’ve never seen him do that since we joined the club. He is also a very good cook and has helped out with the weekly curry night for the members,” Dennis added.

Denis’s first experience of the snow fall as possible. “What I’ve found is that it seems to be important that the ground is frozen before the snow comes because if it isn’t, and there is heat in the ground, you do get more disease.”

Denis admitted that there was a substantial 10-15cm snowfall when they came out of hibernation and that, due to the unexpected early arrival of the snowfall late last year, there was slightly more than usual, but that there was almost no underbuilding and the rain that had fallen made the greens acceptable and that it was indicative of the less stuffy approach there is to golf in Germany, and in particular GC Schmannaeburg.

When I first arrived, Ted Coffren, the mechanic who was retrenched by the club, said that he needed to keep the course open. When Denis arrived and whose input has been invaluable.”

Along with the team, Denis has been working on keeping the course open. “We have increased the frequency and type of aeration and have found the scarred rollers an important tool for keeping the surfaces open. We do alternate the scarred rollers with the verti cut units but aim to scarred roll once a week during the season.”

The biggest project the team has tackled in the time Denis has been at Schmannaeburg has been to lengthen the course by adding a new tee to each of the 18 holes. “When I first arrived, Ted Coffren, our Californian pro, said that the club wanted to lengthen the course and create some monster holes. The par 5s, for example, is uphill and into the prevailing wind is now over 600 yards from the tips, while there are several other holes over 500 yards long, testing our members who had a construction company and he even delivered it to where we were digging out on the course.

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even the most consistent and long drivers.

As a result the course has been rated the 10th most challenging in Germany and the toughest in its local region.

Although Denis has spent nine years at one of the top golf venues in the world he has picked up one or two tips since moving to Germany, not least the dew clearing in the morning.

"Here we have a buggy with a rope about 20 metres dragged behind and the buggy does a couple of circuits around the green and the rope removes the dew in record time."

"The driver just jumps out and removes the pin and the whole course can be done in an hour. I can’t see a downside to it at all,” explained Denis.

Ever progressive, the club, which also boasts an excellent covered driving range, also had plans at an advanced stage to create an additional nine holes on an excellent piece of land close to the newer nine holes.

An architect has produced drawings and there is an agreement in place with the farmer who owns the land to purchase it when the members approve the project.

Despite now having the weapons in terms of length to test the best, the club does not ignore golfers at the other end of the spectrum and has been extremely pro-active in its attempts to attract more people to the game of golf.

"Over 60% of our members are over 50. That is too high, while 23% are between 31 and 50," explained Christiane, who last year set about addressing the problem.

She introduced a series of competitions for beginners, mostly young adults, on the club’s six hole par-3 course lasting over the summer months with free use of clubs and rudimentary lessons.

"We charged 99 euro per team of three and once they had spent some time learning the basics we had a series of competitions – Scramble, Best Drive, Alternate Drive, Individual – held between May and September."

"We gave them free use of the equipment and they could play on the course any time they liked over the period.

"We had barbecues at the prize presentations and everyone had great fun. From the people who played last year we got 10 new members and 10 more are seriously considering joining," she said.

As for dress code, Christiane is keen that nothing is put in their way to prevent new people from taking up the game.

"I have no problem with wearing jeans on the golf course – sorry – and when people ask me what to wear, I say jeans, a polo or a tshirt is ok with me at any time. I love jeans and wear them most days,” she revealed.

"Strict dress rules don’t make the game accessible.”

Christiane is delighted with the club’s new Head Greenkeeper. “He has created a great team spirit and has brought fun to the job,” she said.

While missing life at Turnberry and all his old colleagues, Denis and his new wife, Dawn, and 10-year-old, Logan, have not regretted their move to Germany for one minute and is grateful for all the support he has received.

"We really like the lifestyle. Over here family and hobbies are just as important as jobs and things are a little more relaxed.”

It may be relaxed, but you can be sure that Denis will continue to give 100% to ensure that Golfclub Schmallenberg develops along the successful path it has already started.