



“Golf courses will get over this recession, we have to find ways to tighten our belts – and this must not mean laying off skilled men”

Tough at the top

New BIGGA chairman Tony Smith may be 64, but his passion for greenkeeping has, if anything, increased over a remarkable career spanning nearly half a century. Steve Castle met him at his pride and joy

"In summer, this can be the greatest golf course."

The new BIGGA chairman's words could be mistaken for those of an enthusiastic teenage greenkeeper as he takes me on a whirlwind tour of Teesside Golf Course.

The incredibly flat site – with a natural fall of just eight inches from its highest to lowest point – has been Tony's workplace for over 30 years.

He poured his heart and soul into the role of Head Greenkeeper. He planted a staggering 32,000 trees by hand, obtained a tipping licence to create a six-metre high mound to screen the course from nearby roads and constructed ponds and bunkers amongst countless other innovations.

On an idyllic sunny day, so rare this atrocious summer, it's easy to see why Tony describes the parkland course as "beautiful" as he poses for photos close to the picturesque pond, teeming with carp, which crosses the first and last fairways.

However, he's honest enough to admit they've suffered terribly with the relentless rain this year and he's equally candid on all issues, particularly the desperate economic climate. It's clear he intends to bring this openness to the chairmanship.

He says: "This is the toughest time I've ever known. We did have difficult times in the mid seventies when we had a bad winter and people were laid off. Also, in the late eighties and early nineties we had a lull in membership, mainly because of the boom in golf courses being built. It was all pay and play with nomadic golfers playing a different course every weekend instead of paying membership.

"But the last few years have been the worst, and the amount of rain this year has just topped it off. I know it's been the same for every-

one in the country, not just here.

"We've had floods before, but in April we even had a burst sewage pipe we had to sort out, and we've repeatedly had to close holes because of the damage the water has done to the fairways. It's been one thing after another.

"Golf courses will get over this recession, what we have to do is find ways to tighten our belts – and this cannot and must not mean laying off skilled greenkeepers."

These are not just empty words. Like many clubs, Teesside has had serious cash flow problems – so Tony came up with a radical idea.

"We had a meeting with every single member of staff invited, from the cleaners to the pro, to come up with ideas on how to save the golf club money.

"We had a few brainwaves such as selling land but they weren't sufficient for the amount of money we were trying to save and it was clear we were looking at one or more redundancies.

"So I suggested they make me redundant, and I could then work part-time two or three days a week

until retirement – and that's what we agreed. I was lucky in a way because I've only got a year before retirement so it was something I was able to offer, but you sometimes need to look for more unusual solutions."

So, in a role reversal, Tony now reports to his previous protégé Gary Evans – who is now Head Greenkeeper.

"I thought it would be odd stepping back and letting Gary take over but it's not – in fact he's been here a year longer than me. He probably found it strange at first telling me what to do, but it works well. We've been able to save money

FACTFILE

Name: Tony Smith

Born: Sheffield, 20 August 1948

Marital Status: Married to Lorna with a son, daughter and three grandchildren

Handicap: 14

Hobbies: Amateur dramatics – recently played 'Buttons' in Cinderella!

Favourite Sports Team: Sheffield Wednesday





“Driving membership is the number one item on the BIGGA agenda”



BELOW: Gary Evans, Head Greenkeeper, is second from left, with his team



and go forward in the right way.”

Born in Sheffield, he learnt his trade at various golf clubs across Yorkshire, surviving a redundancy in his twenties. He cites lack of education as one of the reasons behind this early setback, which goes some way to explaining his passion for greenkeeper learning and development.

He admits: “I was appointed Head Greenkeeper at Hallowes GC near Sheffield when I was just 21, vastly inexperienced and big-headed. I didn’t get on with the captain either and eventually was let go.

“I worked at Abbeydale Golf Club twice, Hillsborough Golf Club, and spent a brief period fitting swimming pools after Hallowes until I saw the job of Head Greenkeeper advertised here in 1979.

“I turned up for the interview and my only qualifications were two STRI certificates and one night school certificate – that was it. There was no proper formal training available. I managed to get the job and I’ve been here ever since.

“Our biggest asset, without a shadow of a doubt, is education. Whenever I speak with young greenkeepers now I urge them to take advantage of BIGGA’s many educational opportunities.”

Tony’s formal training began in the mid-nineties when he attended supervisory management courses organized by BIGGA. At that time sessions were held annually, and covered a range of training areas essential for any greenkeeper such as managing people, resources, course development and IT skills.

He explains: “I wanted to improve my skill range and make myself more employable. I wanted to become a wiser greenkeeper with a greater understanding of my staff, golfers’ needs, the environment and also understand issues like budgets and health and safety, and this is how it turned out.

“This was absolutely crucial and all stood me in good stead throughout the rest of my career, I couldn’t have done without it.”

Appropriately, Tony officially replaced Andrew Mellon as Chairman on the first day of golf’s biggest weekend – The Open, held this year at Royal Lytham St Annes. He couldn’t be clearer on his main priority – membership and increasing member engagement.

“Driving and engaging the membership is the number one item on everybody’s agenda, as it should be. And it is down to our current membership to encourage the next generation to join.

“BTME is buzzing, HQ is buzzing

and we’ve got terrific RAs inspiring the regions. But we don’t brag enough about what we do and our successes. I want the members to tell everyone about the education we offer, and examples of what they’ve been doing. I want the members who went to The Open to shout about how great it was. I want them all to be talking about BIGGA.

“As long as we have members the association will always be there, we shouldn’t lose sight of that, and in the past I think we have. I’m not afraid to shake things up to get us where we should be.”

Tony began his rise in the Sheffield section in the early part of his career, in a bid to increase his involvement and also gain a greater understanding of the theories behind greenkeeping.

He then moved on to the Cleveland section committee where he organized tournaments and attended meetings and lectures, continuing to develop his knowledge. Eventually he took over as chairman of this section before joining the board after a brief period as a deputy to the board.

Is he surprised to have risen to the role of chairman?

“I’m gobsmacked really, for a lad from my background. Several people who know me from outside greenkeeping say ‘Why you? There must be someone from St Andrews or Carnoustie who would take it on!’

“We’ve reached a stage where Teesside Golf Course is in first-class condition, there’s a fantastic team in place here so I have the capacity to take the role of chairman on, and I’m delighted to do so.

“The team have been 100 per cent behind me throughout my time here – although they’ll have to put up with me for a little while longer! They’ve looked after the course when I’ve been away on Association business and have done a superb job.”

He admits that some of his social activities – he treads the boards in panto and also enjoys tutoring young actors and actresses, as well as spending time with his wife Lorna and his grandchildren – will have to be scaled back now he’s chairman.

“Being on the board is not as easy as some may think. We give up a lot of our own time and holidays. I wouldn’t like to know how many hours I’ve given up with my various roles at Section, Regional and National level.”

With that, he takes instructions from the Head Greenkeeper Gary and heads off to work on his beloved course.