

When lucky breaks came his way, Martin Twist seized them with both hands. But it has taken more than good luck to become Hillside Golf Club's Head Greenkeeper as JOHN NELSON discovers

**M**artin Twist, Head Greenkeeper at Hillside Golf Club, is the man in charge of the course over which the first ever European Amateur Championship is to be held in 1992 and which has been selected as a qualifying course for The Open at Royal Birkdale. In addition, successful competitors in the ISEKI-BIGGA Championships will be exposed to its charms when their Grand Final is held there on September 12th.

These events are in good hands. Indeed, the choice of Hillside owes more than a little to Martin's skills and experience. He has set out a course which provides a first rate test of links golf, creating a course which looks the part, looking good and inviting.

Still only 26 years old, Martin is no stranger to the big event, which hold no terrors for him. He already has the 1989 Amateur Championship under his belt and was a member of the greenkeeping team which prepared the course for the 1982 PGA Championship held at Hillside.

How come so young a man has been entrusted with such responsibilities? It's quite a story – and it's still unfolding. He had his lucky breaks – which he seized with both hands – but there's much more to it than just that.

Martin is Southport born and bred. He comes from a family with a background of market gardening, landscaping, beautifying gardens, growing flowers and shrubs. Before leaving school Martin knew he wanted a job outdoors, preferably doing something like his father. A school friend told him he was joining the greenkeeping staff at Southport & Ainsdale as a trainee on the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and Martin joined him.

This was how it all started. He found he liked the work and there and then decided to make greenkeeping his life and his career. But he didn't want to just be one of the boys. Oh no, Martin wanted to be a master of his craft and reach the top of his profession. He wanted to make it to the top!

He wanted to run his own show. This meant becoming a head greenkeeper – at a top Club, and also meant becoming appropriately qualified through training, certification and experience. So he started the three year City & Guilds Course in Greenkeeping, stuck at it and passed, but didn't stop there, preferring to continue for a further year to study Greenkeeping Management. He passed.

During this time his YTS traineeship came to an end, causing him to look for a permanent job, and one came available at Hillside – across the railway track from Southport & Ainsdale. This was a job as a member of the greenkeeping staff and it was 1981. He now had his foot on the first rung of the ladder, playing his part as a member of the Hillside team for four years – 1981 to 1985. During this time he contributed to and became familiar with the way in which courses are prepared to hold championships – the '82 PGA Championship at Hillside and the '83 Open at Royal Birkdale – for there was, and continues to be, close rapport between the two greenkeeping teams.

In 1985 he got his first break. The assistant head greenkeeper, Stuart McCall, left to run his own show at Eastham Lodge on the Wirral. Martin succeeded him. It turned out to be a triple lucky break. First, he understudied a first rate head greenkeeper – George Lloyd. Second, he was called



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**Pictured above: Martin Twist, right, with First Assistant and colleague Antony Bailey.**

**Photographs by ALAN BIRCH**

upon to take charge in an acting capacity due to George's prolonged illness over several months in 1986/87. Third, and arguably his luckiest break, he came on the scene at the right time.

By the early 1980s it was clear that a golf boom was in prospect and Hillside was determined to be in its vanguard. This meant having a first rate course and therefore appropriate finance was made available. The green committee, under the direction of Ken Seward, instituted systematic review, a programme of planned maintenance and regular replacement of appropriate greenkeeping equipment. One of Seward's colleagues was David Rose, who succeeded him as chairman in 1986. Like Seward, Rose was equally dedicated to the use of modern methods in course management and authorised the introduction of a computerised irrigation control system for both fairways and greens – and was in office when Martin became acting head greenkeeper.

It fell to Martin's lot to prepare the course for The Amateur Championship in 1986 and, judging by the compliments received, he did it very successfully. During this period he also gained valuable experience in handling staff and putting some of his own ideas into practice. For example he believed that bunkers should look classy as well as fulfilling their purpose – acting as a hazard – as one of the ways to defend the playing character of the course as a test of golf.

He became convinced of the importance of a golf course looking inviting – aesthetically pleasing – from tee to green. He realised this meant a tidy golf course and that this depended on attention to detail. It mattered how a golf course looked and appeared – to golfers. Above all, he came



# Martin's golden opportunity

to understand that successful greenkeeping was as much a matter of forward planning; investment in the right equipment; budgeting and finance; as it was in leading his team out on the course by example.

This meant establishing good working relationships, in particular with the club secretary/manager and the chairman of green. This entailed projecting the right image; which meant doing his homework and, when the occasion demanded, looking as smart as his golf course. One of the ways he understudied George was by representing him on the green committee. Thus, when he became acting head greenkeeper, he was a familiar figure at its meetings and used to procedures.

Martin had acquired, during his 'acting' period, sufficient self-confidence in his ability to run his own show. That being so, when George returned from illness, he began to look around for head greenkeeper vacancies at other clubs. He sought advice, consulting with Hillside's Secretary /Manager, Peter Ray, and the Chairman of Green, David Rose. Both counseled him to do nothing precipitous. They assured him of their full confidence in him and their recognition of the outstanding work he had done as acting head greenkeeper. They expressed their hope that he would stay – at least for the time being – whilst recognising his wish to progress to the post of head greenkeeper.

In the event George Lloyd left Hillside. He took up a post as head greenkeeper at Fairhaven in 1987 and Martin succeeded him. After six years, four as a greenkeeper and two as an acting head greenkeeper, Martin had realised his dream. He had become the top man at a top club and he was still only 22 years old! It was a big step for Hillside but it has paid off.

What then were Martin's immediate, short term, priorities when he took over? First, to continue to smarten up the course. He tried to see the course as the player might see it, recognising the importance of first appearances, of looking cared for, neat and tidy, with no detail out of place. Second, to maintain staff morale, for as their new boss he wanted them to have just cause to be proud of their work, and in what they were hoping to achieve together. Third, he wished to further the good working relationships he already had with the secretary/manager and the chairman of green.

These three priorities were all linked together. He wished to show straight away the standards he wanted which would, he hoped, get his staff fully behind him and convince the club that it could safely leave the course in his hands. Of course there was a price to pay. To maintain his standards the club would need to continue its investment in maintaining a championship course. There would be times when he would have to do unpopular things and needed the club's backing, e.g. when he restricted pin positions on greens to avoid over-use. Martin got it and achieved these three priorities.

Next he had medium term priorities. These included re-equipping Hillside with modern machinery. Naturally he had preferences and having gained support for his case he began to buy. First a Jacobsen Tri-King to cut tees and green surrounds: second, a Ransome Hydraulic 5 to mow fairways

(and leave those picturesque broad swathes): third, a Jacobsen Green-King with turf groomers for greens; fourth a new tractor, spray equipment, and a scarifier/collector; fifth and finally; a Verti-Drain for aeration. He has now achieved these medium term priorities and Hillside compares with the best.

Has he got any long term priorities? Yes, he has. He plans to improve the consistency of the turf on Hillside's course – fairways and greens – so that it more genuinely reflects a true links test of golf. At present the course is a mixture of links and parkland/meadowland. His plan will need a worked-out policy of regular aeration, appropriate feeding, controlled (minimum) watering, together with measured grass cutting. In this as in all his other activities Martin has sought the on-going and regular advice of the STRI. Not unexpectedly, the annual reports on Hillside of David Stansfield (STRI's senior agronomist) have been most complimentary!

Martin has now been head greenkeeper for approaching four years. He is still only 26 years old. He is very happy and enjoys the continued confidence of the Club. There is now a new chairman of green, John McMurray, with whom Martin has an excellent working relationship. For the foreseeable future much remains to be done and Martin and his team play a key role in bringing this about. Hillside has its sights set on gaining recognition as a venue for the top tournaments and as an example applied to be the European venue for the 1993 Ryder Cup matches.

To succeed in its aim, Hillside must have a top quality course. That it was included in the recent Golf World survey of Britain's top 50 and ranked 19th was commendable, but not good enough if the club is to fulfil its aspirations.

Hillside is looking to Martin to mastermind the improvement needed as well as training an assistant and putting into place a first class team of greenkeepers. In due course, no doubt, he may well be tempted by the prospects opening up in Europe for top flight proven head greenkeepers, and he also has a developing interest in golf course architecture and design.

He would like to be a member of a design team, creating and building new courses, and has his own ideas about golf course design. He believes, for example, that fairway bunkers shouldn't be so shallow as to allow a shot to reach the green. A wood from the bunker? 'no way', says Martin, who also has a liking for little fairway pot bunkers.

Martin's family swear he eats, drinks and breathes greenkeeping – as well as being an enthusiastic member of BIGGA. He talks of little else – all the time! Surely he can't have time for interests outside of golf? Well, actually, he has. Predictably they are all outdoor pursuits and include clay pigeon and game shooting; and course fishing. His enthusiasm is infectious.



**Attention to detail pays dividends**

● The author, John Nelson, is a retired college lecturer and a member at Hillside.