

# SMALL IS Beautiful

**Scott MacCallum meets Bryan Griffiths – a man who builds courses for those new to the game.**

**H**ow often have you read of a new golf club which, the literature boasts, is “a championship course over 7,200 yards in length” and has cost the equivalent of the prize fund for half a dozen weeks on the lottery?

Membership fees are invariably five figures and the courses are always in immaculate condition partly because when you pass they are usually devoid of play unless of course there is a visiting merchant bank entertaining clients.

They are all aimed at the elite end of the market and many have failed to break the shackles of enormous debt and seen more bankers pass through their gates. On these occasions though they are wearing business suits and frowns and talk is of rescue packages, not how they contrived to make seven at the short 8th.

These clubs do little to promote the game on a popular level. Even if juniors were subsidised and encouraged to join, the courses are so long and difficult they would soon drain any confidence golf's wannabees had in them.

So where can the young and, indeed, old learn the game and, in the case of the younger students, take the first steps to emulating the likes of Faldo and Montgomerie.

There is an answer but unfortunately it is an option which is being embraced by the game's sleeping giant – Asia – and is being virtually ignored in the United Kingdom.

Short, or par-3, courses built as part of an integrated golf academy allow youngsters, and those oldsters new to golf, to build up skills and confidence in an environment not designed to intimidate before they move onto the rigours of the par 72 7,000 yard monsters.

One man who has been at the forefront of the short course concept is Bryan Griffiths, Chairman of Golfconsult International Ltd, who has found the bulk of his current business in Asia. He has designed over 50 courses in 44 countries and pioneered the introduction of suspended water table green in the UK.

“There are 24 million active golfers in Asia and the latent demand is huge and they are showing a great interest in the short course concept. Unfortunately there is little interest

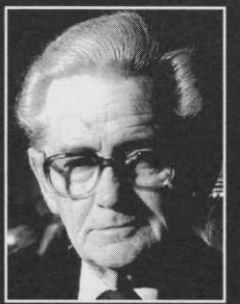
here,” explained Bryan who worked with leading architect the late John Harris.

“We generally build an adults’ short 9 hole course with perhaps two short par-4s, a children’s par-3 course, putting facilities, practice ground and teaching facilities. It is all there. Beginners can play and handicap players can brush up their short and medium iron play on the short course and their long game on the driving range,” he said.

“They can be built on a third of the land of a conventional 18 hole course for two thirds of the cost and the capacity is four times greater than an 18 hole course so they are extremely profitable,” said Bryan, whose company philosophy is “Feasibility Followed by Design.”

“It only takes an hour to get round so many people can play a quick nine holes in their lunch hours. Doing that soon sharpens up your game and handicaps will drop,” said Bryan.

**‘There is an unending supply of people who want to play but can’t’  
– BRYAN GRIFFITHS**



“I design for the 95% of people who pay for the industry and not for the pros who, if you forgive me for saying so, take their money out of the game.”

The par-three concept is not new. Sir Henry Cotton advocated the idea many years ago with his plea for “cow grass” courses where the course merely consisted of cut grass for greens.

“That was great at the time for encouraging people to take up the game but things have moved on and the short courses must be built to the best possible specification. They have to be available for use all the time in all weather so they have to be hard wearing built to top spec using all the modern technology.”

Par 3 course greens are generally two thirds the size of conventional greens and Bryan includes very little rough and no water hazards.

“I did break that rule once where I put in one hole across water. The reason was that the complex included two signature courses which were stuffed with water and the client thought it no bad thing to give them a bit of a knee trembling experience.”

On the whole however the aim of the short course is to encourage and not intimidate.

“There is nowhere in this country where a beginner can feel comfortable and have all the facilities available to them to become a rounded handicap golfer. Beginner demand is almost infinite. There is an unending supply of people who want to play but can’t because they can’t afford it or snobbery keeps them out of the exclusive private clubs.

“The longest par three I’ll have is 190 yards off the back tees anything else is just a waste of money. What’s the point of putting down 200 yard par-3s when most of the users are beginners. Brute force should not be encouraged. Anyway some of the finest holes in the world are some of the shortest. Just look at the Postage Stamp at Royal Troon.”

With land at a premium and extremely expensive many developers, or existing clubs with some spare land, could do a lot worse than consider building a complex dedicated to beginners.

“The smallest course I have done is a kid’s nine holer at 625 yards and this requires only two acres. The standard short course is around 1,500 yards and needs only around 15 acres,” explained Bryan.

Just because a course is designated for children doesn’t mean that older handicap players should shun it.

“You mustn’t be snobbish. Play the 10 year olds. It’s quite a challenge for the adults and I can tell you if you play for a bar of chocolate you don’t win very often.

“Even very experienced players can take out their wedge and play. It requires real discipline. I’m a great advocate of the saying ‘Adults may play if accompanied by a child,’” said Bryan.

So there you are. If there is anyone out there with the wherewithal and desire to invest in a golf development don’t rule out the short course concept. It need not be an act of selfless philanthropy. In the location with a sizable catchment area it can be extremely profitable venture almost guaranteed to make a return on investment much more quickly than a conventional 18 hole golf club.