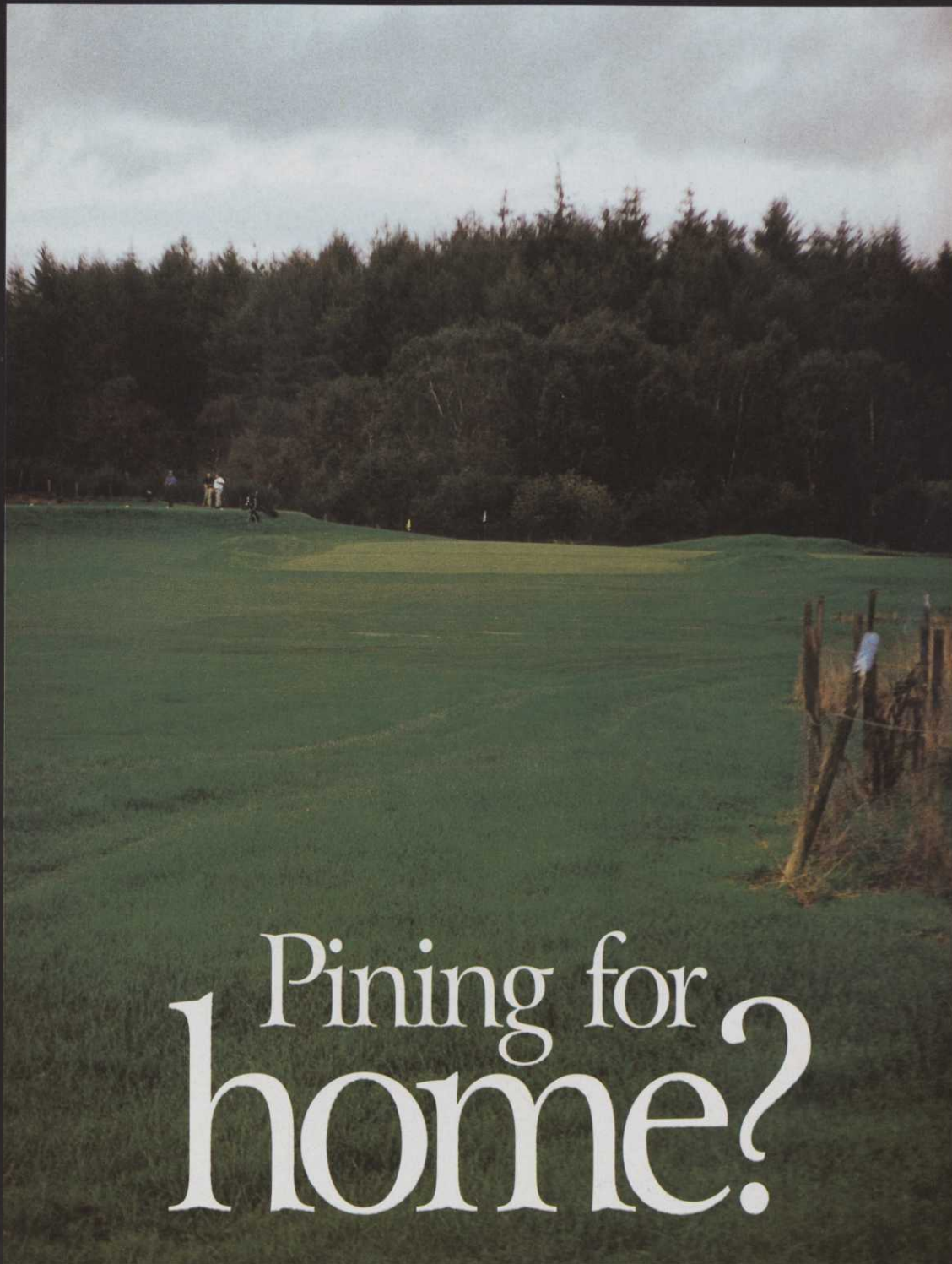


Scott MacCallum visits the club where
nothing is black and white... only Gray



Pining for home?

A visit to The Pines Golf Centre in Dumfries can have you questioning your own sanity. Don't get me wrong it's an excellent new pay-and-play complex boasting floodlit driving range, testing 18-hole courses and an attractive alpine style clubhouse. It's just well... let me explain.

When I drew into the car park for the Ayrshire Section meeting last month I could see Section Chairman, Duncan Gray, standing with a group of students on the 1st tee. It transpired they were from Barony College and Duncan was setting them a project for the afternoon. He greeted me warmly and sent me into the clubhouse to meet up with the rest of the guys.

Having said my hellos and chewed the fat for a few minutes I looked up and recognised the man pulling pints behind the bar. It was Duncan Gray.

A few more minutes passed and the soup and sandwiches arrived. The waiter? Duncan Gray.

Later, after the golf (during which, incidentally, Duncan marked the card of the new course record holder) over the course that was designed, built, and maintained by Duncan – and between handling queries involving till receipts and range balls – Duncan revealed that the curry, a popular option on the menu, was his own recipe. Really, we should have known!

Duncan, however, certainly wouldn't want it to be seen as a one-man show at The Pines. Wife, Greta, is just as busy and operates from a disadvantage from which Duncan doesn't suffer. She's not particularly keen on golf.

While both muck in the general division is that while Duncan is in charge of everything outside Greta does the same inside.

So how did Duncan, a greenkeeper of long standing with a CV boasting such illustrious names as Prestwick St Nicholas and Lahinch, reach the point where he is Captain of his own ship – and many of his own crew members as well?

Pining for home?

Right: The course has established itself well in the short time it has been open

Below: The ever smiling Duncan Gray

Bottom: With Greta, the other half of the team



"I was in charge of the Kyle and Carrick municipal courses in Ayrshire when competitive tendering arrived and destroyed the budgets to look after the courses," said Duncan as we sat in the living room of the Gray apartment, overlooking the 18th green.

"Greta and I had always talked about starting our own business and, being in golf, running a driving range was an obvious way to go, as we couldn't afford our own course... or so we thought at the time."

A trawl around Ayrshire uncovered a couple of possible sites but it was not until they widened their search to Dumfries that things began to move.

"Being local to Dumfries we knew the town didn't have any practice facilities. "There are about 33,000 people in Dumfries, and another 70,000 within 20 miles, but there was no decent practice area for them at all."

"Fortunately we came across an old school pal of mine who had land that he was willing to lease and with the help of another school friend, a solicitor, the deal was struck with an option on the rest of the land, with the long term thoughts on a course.

"We looked at planning approval in December '94 and started work in December '95.

"We did all the work on the driving range ourselves. We prepared the foundations, poured the concrete, did all the slabbing. Even Greta drove dumpers," recalled Duncan.

The project was funded by equity from the family home in Prestwick which was sold, but there were some nasty surprises along the way.

"Putting in the electricity alone cost £12,000 and we had to lay 700 metres worth of road earlier than expected," revealed Duncan.

"The range was a great success. We had a caravan on site which acted as a clubhouse offering snacks," said Duncan, who along with Greta lived in another caravan alongside for about two and a half years.

The range was run by Duncan, Greta, a young skill seeker, a couple of part-



timers, with a couple of youngsters who worked as ball pickers in the evenings.

With the range up and running Duncan's thoughts turned to the possibility of building the course.

"I'd already sussed out the ground and found that there was quite a bit of sand. If it hadn't been there we wouldn't have been able to build," he admitted.

He took on some more Skill Seekers and talked with the Enterprise Board who provided some labour from the Training for Work programme.

"Basically we got a year's free labour but it worked well because everyone we used now has full time jobs," said Duncan, who also has his D32 and D33 and trains his staff on site.

"Initially I built a loop of 11 holes, including two temporary greens and these were played from July '97.

"They were a tremendous success and we were practically overrun with people coming to play, so we thought we'd fire ahead and build the rest of the course. We finished the last nine in September '97 and opened the full 18 in June '98."

Duncan designed the course himself

using experience gained from designing several courses in Ireland including Drumoland in County Claire which was used for a televised pro-celebrity golf series.

"The routing was done fairly quickly and I always had 18 holes in mind when I did the first holes. I created a loop with the 7th green beside the 10th tee and the 14th tee beside the 10th green."

He has also used six different types of construction on the course.

"I've used the course as an experiment as I've always been very inquisitive and what better way to try things than to use your own course. You can only blame yourself," he smiled.

"I've got three greens cut out of existing turf, top dressed, overseeded etc and these are on two different types of land. The 1st is on top of sandy loam while the 5th and 15th are on agricultural soil.

"Then there are two greens built and sodded with my own sod; another two with bought-in turf, while two greens which were seeded with creeping bent. The rest of the greens are build and seeded with fescue bent."

Duncan's greenkeeping philosophy is



not to do much feeding and he has not put on a fungicide since the course opened.

"I've never used much fungicide when I was at Prestwick St Nicholas and Lahinch... and here that approach also helps to save money," he added.

Another other of the major projects was the clubhouse itself.

"When we opened our 18 we were still using the caravan as the clubhouse but with things going well we looked at building a proper clubhouse.

"This proved to be a big problem. We had built the course using income from the range, and had benefited from an interest free loan from the R&A and a grant from the Enterprise Board. As a result we had very little borrowings, but it was extremely difficult to persuade the banks to lend money. It was only when we'd run the course and shown it to be successful that we were able to persuade them," said Duncan, who suspected that as it was around the time that Loch Lomond ran into financial difficulties banks were worried about becoming involved in golf.

"We started to build the clubhouse in the first week of June last year and

again we did a lot of the work ourselves. It was finished in three months and one week," he said with justifiable pride.

"Part of the clubhouse contains our flat which means we are married to the job and can't get away but at least it's better than a caravan. Greta has been a real martyr. Not many wives would put up with what she's had to."

He is under no illusion that despite the course being open and extremely busy he still has a great deal to do on the course.

"I need to put in quite a bit of drainage and will also do some tree planting and tree transplanting. We've got quite a few trees of good size on the periphery and we'll use our digger to move them. I also want to put in a few more bunkers, but not too many."

Asked about how he feels, as he sits looking out at the course he can rightly claim as his own, he has mixed emotions.

"I do have feelings of fulfilment but also a lot of tiredness.

"When you hear other people saying 'I don't know how you've done it.

It's an amazing feat' you think well, I suppose, maybe it is, but because we're so heavily involved - basically it is 24 hours a day - it takes a bit of the gloss of it," said Duncan.

Remarkably Duncan is also involved in the design and building of several other courses including one in Dundee, another at Southern Gailes and another in Crete.

"When you're asked to do it it's tempting to say I've got enough on my plate but it's not often you get asked to design a golf course and it helps to ease the finances. I've only started to take a small wage out of The Pines."

Asked if he would do anything differently, given a clean slate, he is honest enough to admit that perhaps they built the clubhouse a bit too soon.

"I think we'd have left it for another year, even although we were living in a caravan, because it made last winter very difficult. It was only this summer that we began to get on top of it again.

"That said I don't think I'd have done anything else differently, although to be honest knowing what

we know now we may never have attempted it. It has been so horrendously difficult."

As well as the benefit to the golfers of the Dumfries area - the professional gave lessons to 700 youngsters last year and the £12 a round green fee is no deterrent to new golfers - The Pines has also done a great deal of good to the local community with 25 people earning their living through the club.

"So from having a boss and working for other people - and having someone to blame - the boot is on the other foot and I have many people relying on me now."

Despite that Duncan still considers himself to be a greenkeeper through and through.

"I still go out and change holes and cut greens while I don't employ a Head Greenkeeper for two reasons. One, we couldn't afford one and two, I wouldn't like it. It's my course and it will be done the way I like it."

You would certainly be right in thinking that Duncan Gray is a one-off but surely, a visit to The Pines would have you believing that there must be more than one of him.