

Scott MacCallum visited two of the finest clubs in Northern Ireland and found courses at either end of the spectrum...

# Different Strokes

Malone GC + Royal County Down

Photography: Brian Morgan



It was interesting watching Wimbledon recently and the remarkable feats of Pete Sampras winning his seventh singles title and a record breaking 13th Grand Slam title in all.

Despite this, he has not completed the set of Grand Slam titles and the chances are Sampras never will.

Very rarely does a great grass court player have the skills required to win a clay court Championship and vice versa - Andre Agassi being the most recent notable exception - and it got me thinking about any possible similarities in golf.

In the main golfers can win on any type of golf course and you don't get parkland, links, American-style or heathland specialists. Having said that, Seve Ballesteros was never likely to win a US Open, which is known for its tight fairways and penal rough,

while Colin Montgomerie has more chance of winning that particular Championship than the Masters which requires an almost superhuman touch around the greens and deadly putting stroke on them, but in discussing these we are looking at the extremes.

No, the real specialists in golf tend to be the people who look after the courses with parkland Course Managers and links Course Managers tending to stay on their own familiar turf.

Graeme Wylie and Alan Strachan work about 35 miles from each other on Malone Golf Club and Royal County Down Golf Club respectively and, while they are both greenkeepers, the work they do couldn't be more different.

For Graeme, presentation is the key

and his course is a perfectly manicured example of what can be done and a worthy holder of the unofficial title "Augusta of Northern Ireland." Alan sets about his job in a different way to create perfect links conditions using simple course management practices and ensuring as natural a look as possible.

It really does typify all that we enjoy about the game of golf. Let's face it the difference between a grass tennis court and a clay court is the colour and the speed the ball leaves the surface, the dimensions are identical while no two golf courses are anything like the same.

Graeme and Alan, and their respective teams, do exceptional jobs in very different ways and highlight just what a diverse game golf is.

# Malone GC

It is not until you turn off Belfast's Malone Road and into the long drive which takes you up to the clubhouse that you appreciate just what a magnificent setting Malone Golf Club enjoys, and what a fine golf course the members have.

True, the club is regarded as one of the most prestigious in all Ireland while the course has been ranked as high as 14th in the list of top inland courses in the world but perhaps it is its location, just a few miles from industrial Belfast, which makes the sheer beauty of the place such a pleasant surprise.

Dominating the course is a 33 acre trout lake which, in addition to offering fine sport for the club's angling section, is a strategy-influencing potential hazard on a number of holes.

The man with the onerous responsibility of looking after a course that carries the unofficial title of "The Augusta of Northern Ireland" is Graeme Wylie, who also finds time to be Chairman of BIGGA's Northern Ireland Section.

This is a man for whom the need for attention to detail is second nature while customer care is of equal

priority - after our meeting he went off to find a lady member's Gucci handbag which she thought she'd lost out on the course.

"We have a reputation to keep up and I don't want anyone coming here and finding fault with any aspect of the course, or visitors feeling that they had not had their money's worth," said Graeme.

To highlight the point he explained some of his philosophy on presentation.

"It is extremely important that whenever anyone comes here they see high presentation. They come up our lime tree avenue and see nice striped fairways, they see lovely shrubs in flower around the clubhouse and no weeds. Everything must be tidy and brushed clean. It gives an overall impression whenever you arrive and this sets the standard for the whole course.

"You could have the back nine looking fantastic and maybe some of the first nine but, unless the 1st and the clubhouse are good, the first impressions would be of a scruffy golf course," said Graeme, who also has responsibility for the other nine holes and the club's bowling green.

While such a philosophy is one he would share with his opposite number at Augusta National the comparison between the two clubs has a lot to do with the overall look



of the course - number of rhododendrons and the similarity of some of the lakeside holes.

In fact, Graeme cleared many of the rhododendrons from the side of the 18th hole so that the lake was visible to the golfers when playing the hole.

Graeme also feels that the membership does seem to embrace the American influence.

"In the early 80s some of our members visited the States, some perhaps even visited Augusta, and they brought ideas back as to how to improve Malone. I noticed when I took over that a lot of things had an Americanised feel. For example the





use of a lot of American golf course accessories. The pins and cups are not of the traditional UK type. The pins are the big fat ones you get in the States. They are fibre glass and tend to chip easily and don't look good when painted so we have to replace them fairly often."

The element on which most golf clubs are judged is the greens and at Malone they get the highest priority of care in terms of maintenance and presentation.

"They go through a programme of their own and are always hand mown," he said.

The general maintenance of the

course goes through the Malone "housekeeping" practices and is subjected to the formidable "attention to detail" regime.

"The guys out on the course are the eyes and ears of management so if they see something is not right they report it to their supervisor who writes it down and ensures that something is done about it before a member reports it.

"For example, divots should be picked up and litter bins emptied while if there was a broken limb on a tree it would be reported back and a guy would go out with a chainsaw either later that day or first thing in

the morning. There is nothing worse than a member coming to tell me that a job is needing doing."

Graeme feels that the priority he places on presentation stems from his time working at Gleneagles.

"Around the clubhouse you'd see film stars and footballers and you knew that these people were paying to play the course and, in effect, were paying our wages. The worst thing that could happen was that these people would complain about something. It comes right down through your Head Greenkeeper back to yourself and you feel that you haven't done your job correctly," said

Graeme, who in his two and a half years at Malone has been able to instil that same sort of feeling with his staff.

"Gleneagles is a five star resort and I look upon this as a five star golf club. There is a lot of competition between golf clubs and between greenkeepers and I would not have applied for the job if it was not for the fact that Malone Golf Club has a reputation for being the number one parkland course in Northern Ireland.

He is also pleased that he is given the authority to do the job as he sees fit.

"You are put in here to manage and

as a manager you get the resources to do the job on a different level to most in Northern Ireland. I would say there are maybe only three or four clubs in the north which would be at a similar level. Working here is certainly the pinnacle of my career."

Graeme was particularly pleased when he took the job at Malone to find out just how pro-BIGGA the club was.

"One of the questions I was asked was what are my views on further education and training and how would I go about it. They were wanting someone who was going to be enthusiastic

and wanted to train staff," said Graeme, who added that since then two of his team, with over 40 years experience between them, had become involved in education for the first time since starting work at the club.

"The club contributed when I asked them for a donation towards the BIGGA HOUSE fund while they also pay the membership fees of every member of staff."

Graeme brought to Malone a practice that he had started at his previous golf club.

"Greenkeeping is an outdoor job and all greenkeepers tend to get

hungry so the best way to treat a greenkeeper is to fill his belly. I brought in the Captain's Breakfast for Captain's Day and organised club breakfasts for the other occasions when we've had big events and the men have been in from 4.30am. When I put the call out it is usually a full house and the men are sitting down to a fry around 9.30, when all the morning duties have been done."

It was also pleasing to read the fact that former Head Greenkeeper, Jim Bridges, played in the inaugural four-ball when the club relocated to its present venue in 1963. Jim was also



elected an Honorary Member of the Club and when, in 1972, he celebrated 25 years in greenkeeping, the course was closed until 12.30pm as a mark of respect.

He was succeeded by Jack McClinton, who took delivery of the club's first triplex greens mower in 1973 for a cost of £2,300 which enabled all the greens to be cut in a morning. Jack's successor was Frank Ainsworth who took over in February '83 becoming only the fifth Head Greenkeeper in the club's history.

Malone's approach to their greenkeeping staff is being followed by an increasing number of Northern Irish golf clubs with the new BIGGA Section growing in size.

"It speaks for itself. We've now got over 70 members and we had a successful seminar at Greenmount College in 1998 and now two years on we are going to have another on this October, all being well. The speakers are confirmed, most of the sponsorship is in place and it will complement the winter educational evenings and golf days we already hold," explained Graeme.

"The main thing for the members of BIGGA is the professionalism of our Association. It stands to benefit every single greenkeeper that they are in an Association which the golf clubs recognise.

"Since both Sections amalgamated we now have a good strong committee with five officers and five deputies. The main thing is not to become stale and we need to keep the young blood coming through in the Association so that when they come in at the bottom they know that they can work their way up and get there eventually."

Looking ahead at Malone, Graeme is already licking his lips at the prospect of working with the golf course architect on the redevelopment of the 14th and 15th holes while another project they will be tackling is the building of the new maintenance facilities.

"Our present site is a lovely location but I'm well aware of the fact, as is the club, that we are growing by the year with our fleet of machinery and storage is proving a problem and our workshop does need to be brought up to standard.

"It is hoped we will move down beside the bowling green with the present site perhaps being used for dormy or town houses. That would also be good in-built security for the club having people around at night."

Spending time with Graeme it is difficult not to find his enthusiasm rubbing off on you and can easily see why he has risen to one of the top jobs in Northern Ireland and within the Association.

Oh, and the Gucci handbag problem was resolved. It had fallen into her golf bag.





# Royal County Down

Royal County Down is widely regarded as one of the top golf courses to be found anywhere. In fact there are many sane judges who would place it top of a pile containing every course which had ever been built, while many of the top golfers in the world make a pilgrimage to the little town of Newcastle, 30 miles south of Belfast, just to play the course.

It is easy to see why. It provides links golf at its absolute best and when your golf is not up to the task you can wallow in some of the finest scenery in the shape of the Mountains of Mourne. They cause many otherwise focussed players to walk down fairways backwards rather than miss any opportunity to enjoy the views.

The man in charge of maintaining the course and making himself immune from the distractions of one of the most beautiful locations in the world is Alan Strachan, a Scot whose CV contains other such illustrious links courses as Montrose, Royal Dornoch and Carnoustie.

"There are so many reasons why you can see that it is placed so high in these rankings. Obviously you've got the scenery; you've got the length - it is 7100 off the backs with a par of 71, while the greens are small and shed off which, in a sense, is quite similar to Dornoch which also has plateau greens," explained Alan.

Alan has been at the club for five years now and in that time has maintained and, when needed, enhanced the traditional approach to the game that links golf courses represent.

"We like to keep the place as linky as possible. Like golf in the old days when the grass was cut with gang mowers and they couldn't have undertaken all this fancy mowing practices that can be done now. They just went round the green with the

gangs and this encouraged the ball to run off the green and go into areas where the golfers didn't want to be. Having said that, if they missed the green they should have the opportunity to use the putter to get back on. To me that is links golf," said Alan.

His course management practices are out of the same mould.

"My philosophy is to keep it simple.

Very, very infrequent fertilising, a lot of top dressing and very little water. Simple things, but an awful lot of people can make mistakes and change what I think are some of the most valuable golfing assets we have in Britain. We have so few links courses and we really want to look after them and not see them change," said Alan, 33.

RCD is tough. The course record is 66 which, bearing in mind the quality of the players who have tackled it, says much for the quality of its defences.

"When we had the Amateur Championship here last year we had very calm conditions on the first day and the best score was 68 then, on quite calm conditions the next day, it went up to 73. It was tough," he revealed.

Outside of the surrounding scenery the one thing that would really identify Royal County Down is the bunkers.

"The bunkers here are unique," explained Alan.

"Having come from the east coast

of Scotland where it was all revetting it was quite something to be faced with marram, heather, gorse and so much lovely colourful vegetation coming out of the tops of these bunkers.

"I can picture the sheep and the rabbits cowering down into the dunes and creating these bunkers," said Alan, who revealed that it is written



into the RCD policy that the style of the bunkers will never be changed.

They do, however, cause Alan and his staff headaches.

"Because they are not built and designed like a revetted bunker, which are built to retain the sand, the sand blows everywhere, particularly as our sand particles are very fine. Any wind blow at all creates overhangs so an awful lot of sand shaping is required. It is a weekly thing and we have guys out with shovels all the time. What you gain in time not doing the revetment you lose through having to do so much sand shaping.







With such natural bunkers it does beg the questions how do they go about building new bunkers or rebuilding existing ones?

"Since I've been here it has been a bit of trial and error. They hadn't built any bunkers here for a long time before I arrived so we played around really. We dug up cubes or material from heather and marram areas, like bricks really and built up a wall with these. I suppose you could call it revetting after a fashion," he explained.

"The trick is to make it look natural when it isn't. Donald Steel, who does work for the club, was delighted with the results we got. He drew them on paper for us and then left it to us and he was very happy with the bunkers and the shaping."

Two other issues which occupy much of Alan and his 16 man team in their efforts to maintain not just the world famous course but also the little sister Annesley course as well is the gorse and the courses' very shallow root zone.

"The gorse is definitely the main problem at Royal County Down. Sixty years ago we had no gorse and now we are overrun," Alan revealed.

"We would never want to eradicate it all but what happens is that the gorse kills the heather. What we are trying to do is create a gorse line so we'll manage these areas and not let them go out of control. The other areas we will try to wipe out.

"We are currently in the process of looking at the best eradication. We've tried chemical but generally it comes back again so I think we're going to have to take the bull by the horns and do what Ian McMillan did at Hankley Common and just root the whole place out."

Alan sees this as one of the main priorities the golf club has to deal with in the next few years.

"The club is so traditional that they want to get back to what it was like but it will be a long process turning what is gorse land back into heather land."

To alleviate the problem of the shallow root depth the club undertakes an extensive overseeding programme every autumn.

"If any drought comes along it just wipes out the plant so we have our overseeding programme which will be helped by the club's decision to install a new watering system to help bring on the young seedlings. It is just a maintenance tool for us. I'm looking forward to it going in as it will transform some parts of the course in the right way and not transform anything else. At some of the far holes the water pressure of the current system is very poor and we don't get sufficient coverage on the middle of the green. You can see a general thinning out of the sward which in turn allows the meadow grass to establish."

As an additional aid to improving the turf quality Alan has brought in a turf nursery.

"We introduced it for patching purposes and we have different types of seed - fairway, tees with a smooth stalked mix through it which takes the wear very well and some rough mixtures."

As well as course maintenance practices Alan also made changes to some of the other working practices at the club.

"When I arrived the boys were starting work at 8am when there were golfers out on the course before them. I wasn't used to this so I changed it so that we started at 6am and got the club to move tee times back to 8am from 7am so we had a two hour window to do our early morning work.

"The last thing you want is to have machines buzzing around golfers when they've paid £80 a round. We want them to go away having really enjoyed the product because it is a business now isn't it?"

Having tackled the Amateur Championship last year, by the time you read this, Royal County Down will have hosted the British Seniors Championship - the club's first professional event for 50 years.

"I did feel pressure on the run up to the Amateur but we had a great spring and I was very happy with the

course and I'm lucky that I have a really good staff to rely on."

The quality of the course was highlighted last April during the Masters when Steve Rider, interviewing Graeme Storm, the Amateur Champion asked him if he'd been frightened by the speed of the greens. Graeme said not really because he'd played on faster at Royal County Down.

"The greens were very fast then - 11.5 in the early morning and through the day they got faster than that. We are fortunate that the greens are sheltered and as long as the pin placements are sensible we can make them fast," said Alan.

With the best amateurs enjoying the RCD hospitality last year Alan is looking forward to the visit of the best seniors.

"It is a much bigger event than the Amateur. They are talking about 5,000 spectators per day and there will be a large tented village and cameras on every hole. I went to Portrush to get a feel for the size of it last year," said Alan, who added that the club had the Championship for two years.

It can only be good news that a course such as Royal County Down is being utilised as a venue for some of the major events on the calendar and in Alan Strachan and his team looking after it the course will always be at its natural best.