

Laurence Pithie, Director of Maintenance at American Golf (UK) Ltd, provides an insight into the management philosophy of a major golf course operator...



# The business of golf



Above: The Blue Mountain Golf Centre, headquarters of American Golf (UK)

American Golf (UK) Ltd was established in August 1993 when the parent company American Golf Corporation took the opportunity to buy five clubs in the south of England. This was the first acquisition for the Santa Monica-based company outside the United States.

David Price, who is also the Chief Executive Officer, owns the company. An attorney by profession, his belief that golf clubs could be run on a better business footing is perhaps even more relevant today than back in 1967 when the first club was purchased in Los Angeles for \$1.

As we begin the new millennium the company owns or operates around 325 golf courses, all of which are in the United States with the exception

of 20 clubs, comprising 26 courses, in the UK. Although the company is based in California, the clubs are spread across many states including Hawaii and consist of Public, Private and Resort clubs. Today over 15,000 people are directly employed by American Golf.

American Golf (UK) Ltd is effectively one of the 10 regional divisions within the company and operates with a certain amount of autonomy being the only region on 'away' territory. Each region is similarly structured and operates within a well-defined company structure and strategy, although the UK does have its own finance department and external legal office. Geary Leathers, from Atlanta, Georgia, is the UK Managing Director and has served

the company for many years, gaining experience on both sides of the 'pond'. Geary leads a team of six Regional Directors who have responsibility for Finance, Acquisitions, Sales, Operations and Maintenance. The UK head offices are found at the Blue Mountain Golf Centre in Bracknell, Berkshire and provide a central location for the now considerable UK operation.

Each of the 20 clubs is similarly structured whether they are a 36-hole resort complex such as St. Mellion International with hotel and time-share lodges, or an 18-hole daily fee course such as Paultons Golf Centre near Southampton. At these clubs, a General Manager has overall responsibility for the property and he or she

Right: One of the five Ransomes E-Plex II greens mowers that are used on courses close to residential areas

liaise very closely with the Superintendent who is responsible for maintaining the golf course, driving range and usually a small number of golf cars. Both the General Manager and Superintendent are responsible to Regional Directors who assist in the smooth running of these facilities. This is a formula inherited from the United States which has stood the test of time, with the benefit that there is good communication, friendliness, effective management and good team spirit where everyone is working for a common goal.

Since 1993 the UK region has expanded considerably, employing over 1000 people, 160 of whom work full time on the golf courses. The objective is for continued growth, acquiring the right product that suits the AG (UK) criteria, which often involves significant investment, both in the clubhouse and on the course or driving range. With regard to the golf course itself, drainage, irrigation, and turf quality issues are usually the main areas where improvement is needed in order to reach the desired standard.

As well as improving the property, much time and investment is made in both people and equipment. Training tends to be on going with the result that the company can offer good career opportunities for those with the right skills, experience and aptitude. An example of this investment in people is that five of the current Super-

intendents were deputies within the company prior to gaining promotion and one of the Superintendents has been promoted to Regional Superintendent with added responsibilities in the given area.

With regard to maintenance equipment, American Golf has worked closely with Textron Turf Care over the last five years, forming a national agreement that has considerable benefits for both companies. This follows on the heels of a similar agreement to that which operates in the United States between Textron and American Golf Corporation that also includes E-Z-GO golf cars. With over 300 courses within the company's portfolio this involves a considerable amount of business.

The agreement provides American Golf with the opportunity to purchase a large range of equipment and golf cars at a cost-effective price and 'tap-in' to a large network of dealers who give valued support and back up when required. As with any major deal there are occasional hiccups along the way. However, it is fair to say that whenever these have occurred, effective communication allied with a genuine desire to help and supported by prompt action have ensured that the wheels stay firmly on track. This has resulted in the attainment of a high level of confidence from both parties since the signing of the initial agreement.

Below: Public courses like Addington need to be maintained on par with private clubs. The redesigned 3rd green surrounds provide the golfer with improved playing conditions



Textron also offers comprehensive parts back up for all equipment and has loaned machines to a number of clubs when the need has arisen. This is especially helpful when grass growth is prolific and unforeseen breakdowns occur. Trialling new machines such as the electric greens mower is also beneficial to both sides and it is here that feedback is so vital. American Golf now has five Ransomes E-Plex II electric greens mowers, the primary reason being the need to operate within closer proximity of residential areas without creating undue noise, especially at weekends when it is essential for staff to prepare the course ahead of play.

At each of the American Golf properties, a mechanic has the responsibility of maintaining and servicing the equipment. Each year Textron provides a training course with the aim of spending time on each of the main items of equipment used in order to run through fault finding, correct servicing procedures and a general hands-on approach to understanding more about each machine. One of the side benefits from these training courses is being able to telephone the appropriate Textron engineer who can then diagnose the problem and offer advice on what form of action to take. Since most clubs have similar equipment, word is soon passed round when common faults develop and these can often be rectified before problems arise. Again

feedback to Textron is vital since all equipment can develop faults and it is preventative action which helps to keep maintenance costs to a minimum and machinery working.

Not all items of equipment for maintaining a golf course can be supplied by Textron but since the current range includes Jacobsen, Ransomes,ushman, Ryan and E-Z-GO, there is a considerable choice. The ordering process is fairly comprehensive, with much advanced planning. This begins with the Superintendent trialling certain types of equipment that will be requested the following year. This is then discussed and agreed with the Director of Maintenance who then coordinates the orders from each of the 20 properties. Once provisional agreement is achieved within the UK, usually around November, a provisional list is then sent to Textron who can then plan its production and delivery time-scales. The agreed order is then placed sometime in January and that allows both sides to complete the transactions in time for the new season. Equipment required outside of this schedule enters the urgent order category and this usually applies to new properties that American Golf has recently acquired. Upon delivery the safe operation of each machine is explained and the eventual invoice signed for payment once satisfactory performance is gained. Perhaps the most important aspect of this agreement or any other is that there has to

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be good and effective communication between each company and in practice this works very well with regular meetings between both parties.

American Golf will continue to expand within the UK, aiming to acquire several properties each year and expanding and improving existing properties. Inner city courses owned by local authorities tend to be the poorer relation, often requiring major investment, whereas proprietary private clubs are usually better served.

All present unique challenges and it is essential that American Golf has the right people to tackle the job in hand. Interest in other countries is also on the increase and it is only a matter of time before the company spreads its wings even further afield. Irrespective of where a course is there is always the need for equipment and materials and establishing a good working relationship with our key suppliers is of great importance.

Below: Golf cars require regular servicing and Textron's training courses ensure that maintenance technicians have a comprehensive understanding of all equipment

