

Walter Woods reveals the trials and tribulations which went into producing the acclaimed new Kingsbarns course just outside St Andrews

Making of a masterpiece



Kingsbarns Golf Links is just six miles south of St Andrews on the east coast of Scotland. The village itself is picturesque containing a small church with a large steeple which dominates the skyline.

Being close to St Andrews it is not surprising that golf was a favourite pastime among the locals and this dictated that there should be a golf course of their own to allow them to improve their skills. To achieve this a compact but delightful nine hole golf course was created and founded in 1793 on a flat piece of land adjacent to the sea and protected by a large

grassy sea bank. This allowed golf to be played and enjoyed for many years but to their disappointment it would be closed down to allow war exercises to be practised.

The remaining Kingsbarns golfers then joined other local golf clubs but still to this day play annually for the original trophies at nearby Crail Golf Club. Since 1939 the golfing ground had been allowed to grow for cattle grazing purposes.

The new Kingsbarns was resurrected when a local businessman spotted its golfing potential. He contacted two American investors who soon realised

that an outstanding traditional Links embraced with coastal sea views could be constructed which would eventually reflect the heritage of Scottish traditional golf.

Following initial introductions, the first few months were occupied by meetings and planning. Kyle Philips who originally worked with Robert Trent Jones Jr was contacted then selected as the Architect to work in co-ordination with Mark Parsinen. Kyle Philips designed the routing from one to 18 with Mark following up by designing the mounding, slopes and hollows which are the features which

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add character to rugged sea-side Links.

The design of the new course was split into two levels, the upper and lower, with the objective of having as many playing areas as close to the sea as possible. The upper level because of its more agricultural type soil required to have the heavy texture balanced by exchanging and mixing a plentiful supply of sand taken from the lower level. This was time consuming but would be beneficial in the long term.

When I was contacted by Mark Parsinen it was mainly to give advice and also to contribute my Links experience gained by working at St Andrews for over 20 years. I was also given the authority of promoting many projects which are required in the forming of a golf course.

Large bulldozer earth moving equipment operated with skilful trained shapers can grade any mound or contour specified to the plan or drawing. This can be applied to any golf course whether it be Links or inland - with the added benefit that sand can be easier to move than clay. Kingsbarns because of its location would be designed and created to have rugged natural appearance which has been sculptured by mother nature.

Following the first day of earth moving it was discovered to our concern that a thick band of clay which existed some four feet below the surface, was being disturbed and spread, contaminating all of the surrounding surfaces. Owing to this all work was stopped to allow

plans of contours and levels to be modified.

This discovery at first was alarming but did instigate discussions which indicated that a comprehensive drainage system be designed by a drainage expert then installed as work progressed. This decision paid immediate dividends as we were about to experience the wettest winter then following summer since weather records were initiated.

As the development progressed much slower than anticipated owing to excessive rain, it did provide the opportunity to plan and organise important side issues such as mains electricity large enough to supply maintenance and Clubhouse demands. Fresh water was piped from the village with irrigation water taken from underground aquifers by two 90 metre deep bore holes.

Maintenance buildings were sourced and investigated with the view that this building would be the nerve centre of the project, large enough to contain all necessary machines to serve a high standard well-maintained golf course.

Over the next few months frequent rain showers inflicted many delays which were frustrating. Every day, or each dry spell, had to be taken advantage of. Motivation and organisation were the key words required to drive forward every inch of progress.

Once a fairway green or tee was completed they were assessed by the Architects then passed onto the contractors for cultivation, preparing, then seeding. Large areas were seeded by machine drilling lines of seed at varying angles. The mounds or slopes were hydroseeded which is a machine containing a large tank which water seed and a paste-like substance is mixed then high pressure powered sprayed onto the surface at equal thickness allowing the seed to stick and germinate much quicker.

Owing to the traditional aspect fine blends of grasses were selected capable of blending to form a uniform sward. These were mainly consisting of fescue and bent grass which provide the seaside appearance but are also capable of withstanding the vagaries of our ever changing weather.

Seed selected for fairways would be 20% slender creeping red fescue, 30% chewings fescue, 30% strong creeping red fescue, 10% Browntop Bent with 10% Poa Pratensis for quick healing purpose.

For greens the seed selected would be 30% slender creeping red fescue, 40% chewings with 30% Browntop Brent grass

Tees were almost similar to greens but had a percentage of Poa-Pratensis added with a slight reduction to the creeping red and chewings.

Roughs on a Links, particularly the periphery mounds and dunes, is where the whole visual aspect can be highlighted like a beautiful lady all dressed up. We chose sheep's fescue as the main variety mainly because of its upright slender graceful stance which changes to a delightful pinkish hue towards the late summer.

During 1998 seeding continued to all areas. While achieving this two out-of-play locations were selected for heather planting by plugging small potted heathers into the ground but before doing so the selected ground was made acid by spreading aluminium sulphate. Gorse bushes which are common to links were also planted at chosen points mainly to provide strategic playing issues. Broom which has a similar appearance to gorse but is not so hardy, was attempted by adding the broom seed into the hydroseeder tank when seeding the outer perimeter mounds. This became surprisingly successful.

1998 progressed slowly often with unexpected difficulties experienced mainly by heavy rainfalls creating flooding then gathering force washing out many of the newly cultivated slopes finishing up with depositing large heaps of soil and seed. Patience





and hard work were necessary using the same motivation as a colony of ants. Soils had to be pushed back again to be prepared and seeded, sandbagging and silt fences erected with the same mental illusion employed by King Canute

Work regularly would be interrupted to the dismay of the contractors and owners patience would be stretched to the limit. Four golf holes and haulage routes remained incomplete but with the intention of cultivation and preparation ready for completion the following year. In the meantime bunkers, although roughly shaped by machines, required to have the dimensions agreed so that they flowed with the appearance matching the surrounding topography. Some were selected for revetment, others would have rounded grass faces. Drainage in the bases would be essential as would be the surround close area to prevent water running into the bunker. Sand used for filling was stockpiled from the lower bowl of the site. It was of good particle size, ideal for any golf course.

A decision was also taken to plan a series of network roads to run the length and breadth but mainly around the outer periphery designed specifically to accommodate maintenance machinery so that golfers would not be distracted. To install these roads a small track vehicle and operator would

grade and level the base for locally quarried hard-core to be delivered and then spread at equal thickness before being vibrated in solid then followed with a topping of compacting gritty ash material. Drainage to low lying parts of the road were also installed so that excess water could be removed quickly.

The old saying of March winds and April showers give way to May's flowers is usually an accurate prediction. March allowed us to cultivate, de-stone and prepare, April provided light beautifully spaced showers which assisted rapid germination. May arrived providing us with welcome sunshine which encouraged the grass to grow. Once established it was gently rolled followed up with a light application of sulphur orientated organic fertiliser. Once satisfactory grass cover became established it would be mutually decided by the contractors and owners that completion documents could be agreed and signed.

Following them another army of contractors arrived to build access roads, Clubhouse and other buildings, install separate sewage and water lines.

It never ceases to amaze when seed germinates, assisted by warm weather

and light rain showers, and this produces personal satisfaction to whoever seeded it. Our seeding was satisfactory, pushing through and growing vigorously dictating that properly skilled greenstaff be employed with the first appointment of a Golf Course Manager then a Deputy Manager right down to the labourers whose duties would entail the million and one jobs still to be completed.

Stuart McColm, who was the Project Manager with the contractors, was selected to become the new man responsible for the maintenance. Stuart was the ideal candidate having knowledge of the whole workings of the site. On top of that he was also a knowledgeable greenkeeper having

been employed by me to work on the St Andrews Old Course for a period of time. Staff now brimming with enthusiasm, all armed with the latest ride-on cutting machines, engrossed with the image of St Andrews fairways or the long snaking putts of Augusta greens, went forward in the creation of fast running Links-type surfaces which was our number one prime objective.

Growing the grass in to provide playing surfaces is a crucial factor.

Once contractors have left faults are usually discovered but allowances have got to be made. In our situation there were few owing to the professionalism of the company, Southern Golf, who have built many golf courses through-



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out Europe. Having plenty of time is beneficial but could be termed a luxury to most. It is however inevitable that the owners will want to open sooner rather than later owing to financial commitment and who can blame them. In our situation we were reliably informed that Kingsbarns Links would have to be ready for play just prior to the Year 2000 Open Championship. With this directive we could assess that a large number of golf holes contained reasonable grass surfaces leaving only a few which would have to be managed discreetly without force being used.

Greens are the prepared part of the golf course where most discussion takes place. This is the area where they are good or bad, where scores are made or critical comments heard. Kingsbarns greens were designed to be extra large

with a similar strategy which could be found on St Andrews Old Course, put your drive into the correct position on the fairway or suffer the consequences with your approach shot. Before the greens and surrounds were built a thick layer of blown sand was placed onto the total area. It was on top of this that the layer of root zone material was placed. This was the method employed on old fashioned Links many years ago. The rootzone was made up of 70% local sand mixed with selected soil from the site. These were laboratory tested for drainage capabilities. Tees were also large, constructed exactly the same with a variety of shaping to provide a more interesting appearance. On both constructions wind interference was taken into account. Fairways were the areas where we anticipated we would experience most difficulty. Some of the upper level the soil still contained more than average silt levels indicating that problems may occur if we were to become complacent. On account of this we had already organised vertidrainage, solid-tining followed up with sand applications drag matted down the holes. Hollow-coring then removing the cores was also achieved on five fairways. Again we topdressed this time using soil and sand mix similar to rootzone mix. Overseeding on top of existing grass was also achieved with good results.

The week prior to the 2000 Open Championship and our opening date soon arrived. Cutting routines organised by the Course Manager were succeeding with the modern sit-on speed driven fairway mowers and pedestrian roller mowers on greens soon provided a polish. Heights of cut were kept higher than normal with greens being reduced to 6mm from 10mm Tees were set at 8mm with fairways gradually reduced to 14mm. Although the fairways were extremely

wide the band of semi-rough was extended at landing areas mainly to accommodate high handicappers but also to speed up play Fertiliser applications were kept deliberately light at regular intervals always using sulphur orientated mixtures spread on all areas throughout all of the golf course except roughs.

Irrigation was also frequently used during this period. Stuart McCollm, along with his First Assistant, would regularly walk the whole of the golf course once a week. When inspecting the greens Poa-Annua invasion was the biggest fear. On many newly constructed golf courses if the green structure was incorrect or if the maintenance attitudes were not properly implemented Poa-Annua would be the first to invade. In our situation we decided to pluck it out with the plan adopted of low fertility coupled to minimum irrigation applications. Aeration in the form of 8mm tinning was also organised on a monthly basis.

Although I am sure the owners along with everyone concerned were quietly confident of their product they received a massive boost when the R&A indicated that they would financially assist over the first five years, a deal which would allow their Members along with Local Club Members to play the golf course at a reduced green fee. However, they were overwhelmed with the reaction from the world's press, players and golfing bodies, almost everyone involved in golf, all indicating that this golf course was going to be great. To cap it all, Dunhill Company decided that changes should be made to their existing Tournament to make it into a Pro-Am concept, two Professionals combined with two Amateurs, similar to the AT&T played at Pebble Beach, organised to play at Carnoustie, St Andrews and Kingsbarns - Big Company indeed!

