

R&A Golf Course committee

LEADERSHIP AND GUIDANCE

Scott MacCallum meets Michael Barratt, the public face of the R&A's new Golf Course committee which has been created to offer leadership and guidance on course management issues



Everyone knows that the R&A organises The Open Championship

Approach any group of golfers and ask them who is the governing body for the game and most will be able to tell you that it is the R&A. Ask the same group what the R&A does and some will be able to tell you that they set the rules of the game and organise The Open and several of the largest amateur events on the calendar like the Walker Cup and the Amateur Championship.

But the R&A's input into the game now stretches much further and deeper than that to the extent that, with the formation of a new committee, clubs everywhere – particularly in Europe to begin with – can look forward to receiving best-practice guidelines on course management, an accreditation system and co-ordinated research effort.

The Golf Course committee has been born out of R&A Secretary Peter Dawson's desire to offer genuine leadership on vital golf-related matters.

The public face of the Golf Course committee, which replaces the R&A Advisory Panel, which had a similar, if less dynamic, remit, is a man whose face is, indeed, very well known to the public. Michael Barratt's experience in television and media communications is second to none and for several years now he has been working with the R&A. Now he has become Communication Consultant to the new committee.

"We aim to promote best practice guidelines on those issues and also create a system of accreditation to be used across Europe and eventually beyond."

Some time ago, the Advisory Panel identified six key issues affecting course management in these changing times: Climate or climatic change; water; chemicals, planning; levels of play and finally the environment.

Michael was initially responsible for a three-pronged campaign to spread the word and instigate debate on the issues - a video, "A Course for All Seasons"; an accompanying booklet with the same title and two



Michael Barratt, the public face of the new R&A Golf Course committee

Conferences, one in St Andrews, "On Course for Change" (covered in the March 2000 issue of Greenkeeper International), and the other on the continent.

The video and booklet explained the real fundamentals of golf course management and showed how different types of golf courses were managed. This was sent to each golf club in Great Britain and Ireland as well as to each of the Federations in Europe and was fully funded by the R&A.

It was followed up by the St Andrews Conference, in early 2000, which received quite a bit of publicity for what emerged - especially on coastal erosion. But it was the second Conference, held near Lisbon towards the end of last year, which was to prove the catalyst for this new committee.

'Changing Course in Europe' was one of the most exciting conferences I've ever had anything to do with. It was very evident that there was a strong feeling from delegates of looking to the R&A for leadership on a whole number of issues," recalled Michael.

Peter Dawson was in attendance and was initially surprised by what he was hearing, and then greatly moved.

"As a consequence, at the end of the conference, instead of just saying what a great conference it had been and thanks for coming, he said he had been moved and that it had given him a vision," said Michael.

Peter Dawson then outlined this vision of establishing a new R&A body which would concern itself with key issues on behalf of Great Britain and Ireland and the whole of continental Europe and eventually a wider field than that.

"He was speaking very much from his own heart and, I thought, very bravely because he knew it would be recorded and people would be looking to see what he would do," recalled Michael.

Since then things have moved remarkably quickly considering what needed to be put in place to make it happen. It's a fact that Michael is keen to emphasise, reinforcing the importance that is placed on the new committee by the R&A.

"It was agreed by the R&A General Committee that there should be the formation of a golf course committee and the Advisory Panel was dissolved."

The new committee, comprising R & A members is Chaired by Tim Taylor, with Deputy, Nick Park (who carried out the same roles on the Advisory Panel), Jaime Ortiz Patino, Michael Reece, Robert Webb and Bo Wickberg, with Peter Dawson, Golf Development Secretary Duncan Weir and Financial Secretary Mark Dobell on an ex-officio basis. The R&A is in the process of recruiting a full time Secretary to serve the committee.

"Everyone has a great deal to offer with vast R&A experience and outside business skills while Bo is a leading figure in Scandinavian and European golf affairs.

"Our first priority has been to find out what the Europeans expect of us.



Amateur Champion Alejandro Larrazabal

So we first of all sent out a simple questionnaire to every Federation and Union. Among the things we wanted to know was whether they would appreciate a visit from us so that we could really get to understand what their needs were and how they thought we could help. The response was unanimous. Yes, they said, let's get together. So we have already instituted a series of meetings on their home ground. I've been to Holland, to four Scandinavian countries with Bo Wickberg and (by the time this article appears) Spain, Portugal and Italy with Tim Taylor.

"An ad hoc committee has also been formed, chaired by Bo Wickberg, which is to report very soon on how to establish best practice guidelines, an independent accreditation body and how to improve the image of the game with EU legislators, national governments and local authorities," said Michael.

It is this latter role which is perceived to be one of the biggest challenges, particularly in continental countries where golf doesn't have a real history and established reputation.

"One of the big problems is that much legislation out of Brussels and elsewhere doesn't differentiate between farmland and golf - so golf often suffers".

The ad hoc committee is looking to bring in help from inside and outside the game. "We learned some time ago that it was very important to work with other bodies, especially in the environmental and ecological field. For example, Keith Duff, from English Nature, has been a wonderful support for us."

Looking at the make-up of the committee, and appreciating its remit, a concern could have been the lack of any greenkeeping representation - Walter Woods and George Brown sat on the original Advisory Panel - but this is explained by Michael.

"Tim Taylor wanted the committee to be small and dynamic and to pull people on board when we needed them and I can say that BIGGA and its members will be involved. BIGGA has a lot to help us with, particularly on the best practice guidelines. BIGGA features large in our thinking."

Asked how the success of the committee will be measured in five years' time, Michael is clear on the matter.

"Success is easily measured. In five years' time, in fact long before five years, we will have established a series of flexible best practice guidelines.

We face two difficulties. One is making it simple. Any attempts I've seen already have been far too complicated. The other is that they have got to be broad enough and comprehensive enough to embrace very different conditions. There's the hot and dry Mediterranean Basin and then there's Finland where they can only play for five months of the year. But people we have talked with have agreed that it is an achievable objective.

"I have to say it is all very exciting," concluded Michael, as he prepared for his next visit.