

Course Feature

BAY WATCH

Scott MacCallum met up with Neil Ballingall, Course Superintendent at the magnificent new St Andrews Bay development.



If you haven't yet heard much about St Andrews Bay. I can promise you that before very much longer you will.

It's not much of a prediction. A 36 hole golf complex, with 209 room five star hotel, with views overlooking the Home of Golf, is unlikely to remain much of a secret for long.

Part of a stable of resorts owned by Dr Don Panoz, who made his fortune by, among other things, developing the nicotine patch, St Andrews Bay sits well in a portfolio which also includes the Chateau Elan Resort, in Georgia, home of the Gene Sarazen-designed Legends Course.

Each of the two St Andrews Bay courses has a famous golfing name attached. The Torrance Course opened last October and the Devlin Course, opened just this August, and the two designers Ryder Cup Captain, Sam, and Australian Senior Tour player, Bruce, can be might proud of what they have achieved. In each case they worked in conjunction with the respected Denis Griffiths Associates, of Georgia. The responsibility of designing any course associated with St Andrews is enormous but everyone involved has risen to the challenge.

The person with the responsibility of managing the two courses is local man, Neil Ballingall, who took up the post of Golf Course Superintendent in May of last year, when the majority of the

Torrance Course had been grown-in and the closing stages of the Devlin was still being constructed by Southern Golf.

"When I arrive I had three or four months to build my own team from scratch. I was given a budget and although I did bring some guys in from clubs round about I mainly took from Southern Golf, as the guys had built the courses and knew the construction back to front. I also took from Elmwood College, with whom I worked very closely," said Neil, as we chatted in his superb, albeit temporary, base in a farm complex on the edge of the development. A state-of-the-art maintenance complex is one of the next projects.

The two courses sit high above the sea, between 80 and 120 feet above the coast bed, on a marine plateau about two miles out of St Andrews, on the Crail road. On first glance they appear to be typical examples of Scottish links but appearances can be deceptive and St Andrews Bay is very much a fusion of Scottish golfing heritage and high tech American-style grasses and maintenance regimes.



Neil (centre) with Fraiser Wright and Paul Britt



The team

"This was particularly apparent in the grow-in which was far more aggressive than the Links maintenance I'd done before. Where I'd maybe use an 8-0-0 once a year they were using a 16-16-16 every ten days just to get the grass establishment," explained Neil, whose family home is in nearby Lower Largo.

The greens are built to USGA Guidelines with traditional Bents and Fescues - Barcrown, Helena, Bargreen and Centre - but the tees and fairways are primarily rye grass.

"The decision was made because of the hardiness because we are on quite an exposed site. Also we are a conference hotel and want to cater for every golfer not just the low handicapper so we wanted a sward where the ball would sit up," said Neil.

"The new Dwarf rytes can be cut to the same height or lower than fescue."

The Devlin Course also boasts a strain of Dwarf Rye that has been named after the St Andrews Bay parent company.

"Elan Grass is coming out for general release this year and is in the new STRI listings. It was developed at Limograin's research base in France. This sits alongside the Merci and Belview which is used on the tees and fairways.

Rather than go to one company for their seed requirements the decision was taken to go with what was considered the best for each area of the golf course regardless of which seed house would be involved.

"We went to Brian Robinson, of Grass Science, and rather than stick with one supplier he selected the cultivars from different seed houses and put our grasses together for us. I suppose in doing so we went against the grain," joked Neil.



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Course Feature



Neil has 25 staff to maintain the two courses and the hotel grounds but knows that what would be considered a large number is the minimum requirement for such a high maintenance site.

"The pros and cons of rye grass are exactly the same - you have to cut it more often but we also have to use probably 75% more fertiliser and water on rye than on fescue and bent. It is very different to what I've been used to," explained Neil, who has traditional links such as Muirfield, where he was Assistant Course Manager, and Lossiemouth, where he was Course Manager, on his CV.

"With rye grass you do need more and bigger machinery and, added to that, we have a considerable area of land to look after - 520 acres which includes the Hotel grounds as well."

Neil uses predominately Toro kit with backing from Hendersons of Haddington and Lely UK and is delighted that it copes well with the demanding conditions it operates under. The full range from pedestrian greensmowers, to fairway mowers and aerators cost the club almost £650,000.

"We're still very much in the process of finding out what's best for the courses and what's the best amounts of everything. We've already changed our fertiliser regime from quick release to slow release and back to quick release again while we've also tried liquids.

"We are the first golf course to put rye grass on a site like this and we have to find everything out. We don't want to pollute the environment and we don't want to waste money," he said.

Another local man, Fraser Wright, is the Head Greenkeeper on the Torrance Course and Neil's Deputy, while Head man on the Devlin Course is Paul Britt, who came over from Chateau Elan to work at St Andrews Bay.

"We joke that Paul is now well on his way to thinking like a Scottish greenkeeper."

Neil is aware that there are some people who might feel that a St Andrews course should be maintained in the style of traditional St Andrews golf courses and stresses that there is room for both methods.

"We're not a traditional links as such. We have got the traditional links look but the definition of a links golf course is the link between the sea and arable land and here the two courses are built primarily on clay having been potato, broccoli and sugar beet fields before becoming golf courses. We're not on the link between the two so by definition we're not a links.

In the main Neil is left to manage the golf course as he sees fit and has been gratified that his spending requirements have been met in full, despite the fact that Foot and Mouth; September 11th; the threat of impending war, not to mention the World Cup has meant, like the rest of the world visitor numbers being down on expectations. However, there is one request which comes from Dr Panoz that he is expected to carry out.

"We have to maintain the golf courses with stripes and make them green. That's our remit from the States. The other golf courses in their portfolio are traditional American designs and Dr Panoz wants all of his courses maintained dark green with stripes," explained Neil.

Asked what the aspirations are for St Andrews Bay, Neil is quite candid.

"Primarily we want to make money and we want people to come and play the golf courses and that's why we have tees which means that the courses can be played from anything from just over 5,000 yards to over 7,000 yards on both courses.

"But we want to be recognised as having some of the best golf courses not only in St Andrews, but in Scotland, Britain and the world as well. Dr Panoz says that's what he wants from his golf courses and that's what we've got to deliver."



A close look at the two courses endorses Neil's boasts about his team. The quality of the workmanship is second to none and the attention to detail absolute. That extends to the gardening squad who, last year, planted 30,000 trees

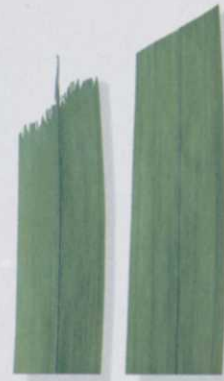
Neil is aware of the responsibility of being a new development in the Home of Golf and his comments on the matter are very pragmatic and sensible.

"We're not in the market to go against the Old Course. No-one in their right mind would compete for business with the Old Course while, on the other hand, we are not in the business of competing against Kingsbarns, which is four miles round the coast from us. Feel that we can work hand-in-hand with Kingsbarns with Kingsbarns visitors staying in our hotel and our visitors playing Kingsbarns as well," explained Neil.

He is also aware of the difference in managing a golf club and a golf resort and he says that he has learned a lot from listening to the likes of George Brown at Turnberry and Jimmy Kidd, at Gleneagles.



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Course Feature



"If the hotel says it's got 150 golfers each paying £45 who want to play but I know the course is three inches thick in ice, what are you going to do? You've got no choice and it is just a case of using greenkeeping skills to repair any damage."

Asked if he feels pride in managing two golf courses in the Home of Golf, Neil is quick to put a bit of distance between St Andrews Bay and the St Andrews Links.

"I feel pride in the job I do at St Andrews Bay. I wouldn't like to say that I've got pride because it is St Andrews because that really belongs to the links themselves, and the accolade of being a Superintendent at St Andrews belongs to the guys who work on the links.

"I do feel very privileged to be Superintendent at St Andrews Bay and firmly believe it will soon be known the world over."

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