

Course Feature

A Break with Success

Scott MacCallum travelled to Robin Hood country to meet Ryun Holden, a Course Manager who has made the most of his opportunities.

If we are honest we all sometimes feel in a bit of a rut and hanker after taking the plunge and doing something completely different for a while. Thanks perhaps to the need to keep paying the mortgage most people resist the urge, soldier on and eventually work it out of their system. Others do make a life changing decision and head off in a completely new direction with varying degrees of success. Others treat it more as a sabbatical, a chance to spring clean the mind, and return to the profession they left with renewed vigour.



The current view from the 1st tee

About five years ago Ryun Holden, First Assistant at his local club near Blackburn, decided to take a break from greenkeeping and spend a year abroad. He gave up his job and spent six months in France and six months in Spain working in bars, learning to play the guitar and indulging in his love of art. He even managed to sell a few paintings.

You could say that it was a voyage of self discovery during which he discovered that he actually missed greenkeeping. So on his return he trawled the pages of Greenkeeper International for First Assistant and Deputy jobs. With his first interview he came up trumps and landed the position of Deputy Course Manager at Oakmere GC, near Nottingham, a significant set-up from the position he had left over a year before. There was more, however, as six months later the Course Manager, Andy Bowey, decided to return to his West Country roots and Ryun was promoted to Course Manager.

Since then, although it doesn't remove the possibility that without the break he may have achieved equal success, he has become a veritable walking advert for taking a year out as he has gone about his job with an energy, vigour and no little intelligence. He has designed and built three new holes; overseen the club's successful application of planning approval for the removal of around 2,000 trees; secured lottery funding for a heathland generation scheme; reduced the club's on-course disease by 100%; built a golf academy for the club's team of professionals; built or rebuilt 80 bunkers and much, much more.

Oakmere, in the Sherwood Forest area of Nottinghamshire, is an unusual club. It is owned by a lady descended from an Admiral who fought in the Battle of Waterloo. A hillside overlooking the club is bare but for groups of copses which are laid out

exactly how the battalions lined up during that famous battle. It was her husband's rank of Commander which provided the name for the 9 hole course.

Oakmere's Course Manager was lured into greenkeeping by the age old route of being a young golfer who worked on his own course Darwen GC in the summer and being bitten by the bug. He is a 10 handicap golfer.

"I supposed I may have regretted not continuing with my A Levels and going on to college or university but as it has turned out I became a Course Manager at 25 and I may not have achieved as much had I got a degree," said Ryun, whose father is a golf professional based in Switzerland.

He thoroughly enjoyed his time at his local club Darwen rising to the position of First Assistant, working under the late David Young, but had concluded that there was no real possibility at that time of promotion when the opportunity arose for him to spend the time abroad.

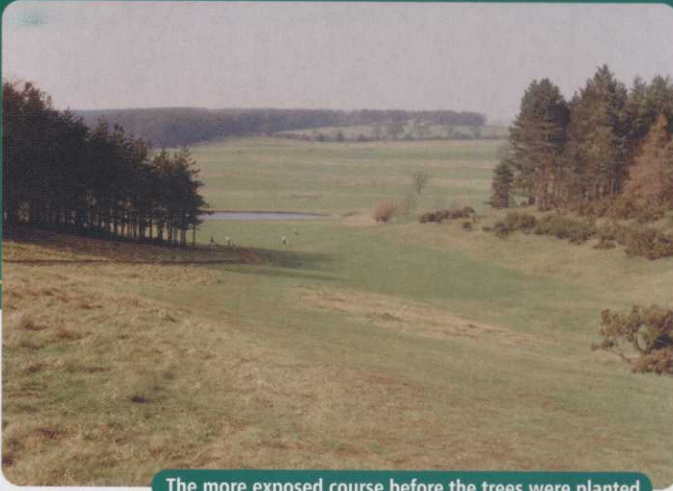
"I wasn't sure that I'd return to greenkeeping and with my love of art and golf was contemplating moving into golf course architecture and spoke with the Institute of Golf Course Architects about their diploma course."

However after a tremendously enjoyable 12 months he realised that he missed greenkeeping.

"I don't regret going for one minute and it got me out of the small town mentality I'd developed where you think you'll drop off the end of the world when you leave the outskirts of your home town."

Having secured the Deputyship at Oakmere Ryun found himself riding a very steep learning curve with Andy Bowey throwing him in at the deep end.

"Andy was a very good manager and had me involved in disciplinary matters and



The more exposed course before the trees were planted



The Oakmere Team

the budget from day one - all the business side of things which I'd never dealt with before. He got me up to speed very quickly."

Before he headed back to the West Country and a Course Manager's job in Taunton, where he would be closer to his family, Andy put Ryun forward as a potential successor and before he knew it, having been at the club for no more than six months, he was Course Manager.

Oakmere's Director of Golf, Daryl St John Jones, together with Andy, had made massive strides in improving both the course itself and the profitability of it as a business and when Ryun took over as Course Manager he had a superb platform from which to work.

"The membership has increased from around 300 to around 1000 and Andy had started an extensive tree planting programme under the guidance of Eamon Wall Associates. Over 20,000 broad leaved trees indigenous to the Sherwood Forest area have been planted and once they are established it will make for a superb treelined course," explained Ryun.

Ironically, it was that huge tree planting programme which caused a few problems for Ryun when it came to putting into practice the re-routing of the 18 hole Admiral's course.

"The course had the 9th green and 10th hole at the furthest point from the clubhouse and it was decided that the club would benefit from three loops of nine holes. That would involve rerouting the course and Daryl and I looked at the wood in the middle of the site and decided we could put three holes through the wood and achieve our aim of creating three loops of nine. By bringing mature trees into play we would also be producing an instant 'wow' factor.

Ryun applied to the Forestry Commission for a felling licence but was told that for every tree they took out they would have to replace it with another.

"I explained that we'd just planted 20,000 trees and that there was no room for any more but I was told that the replacement couldn't be retrospective and with three and a half hectares and around 2,000 trees to remove it just wasn't feasible."

Plan B involved acquiring planning permission from the Sherwood and Newark Council which would override the need for a felling licence and again Ryun was heavily involved in the planning process.

"It took a great deal of work and I was delighted to have Eamon Wall's help throughout. Meetings with the Council were held on site and Eamon's environmental surveys were instrumental in our success as we created the argument that because we would be cutting sections out of the wood to create the three holes we would

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Course Feature



The dense woodland before work began

be producing more woodland perimeter and as most wildlife lives on the woodland edge we would be increasing the amount of habitat. We were also to be thinning the woodland which would extend its life."

Approval was duly granted and Ryun produced another master stroke by making the extensive project self financing.

"I negotiated with the company who did the removal that they could sell the timber," said Ryun, who also acted as the Project Foreman.

For a man whose wish had been to become a golf course architect the opportunity to design three new holes for the course was a dream come true.

"It wasn't easy as, although we could look at the forest and agree what the best route for a hole was it wasn't until we got right in among it that we could actually appreciate the nature of the land."

However Ryun produced a beautifully drawn plan which is still on display in the clubhouse for the two new par-4s and one par-3 which as well as giving the "wow" factor achieve the aim of producing the three loops of nine which would be so useful to the club.

The arduous task of tree and stump removal began in September '01 and the holes are due to be opened officially on May 26.

The layout will therefore be the first six holes remaining the same, the 10th will become the 7th, the 11th will be the new 8th, the 9th is one of the new holes as is the 10th while existing holes take you to the 16th which is Ryun's new par-3 which he hopes will become the club's new signature hole with the existing 17th and 18th bringing the course home.

You can tell just by chatting to Ryun how delighted he is to have been given the chance to combine his golfing, artistic and greenkeeping skills to such good effect.

However it was his, previously underutilised administrative skills which were again put to good use when he won lottery funding for the club's heathland creation scheme.



The tree clearance provided some outstanding potential

"We previously had grant aid from DEFRA for a heathland stewardship scheme but this was subsequently withdrawn and, as I was keen to continue the work we had started in creating heathland, I approached the Sherwood Forest Trust, a wonderful body who run the Sherwood Initiative, which had secured lottery funding covering the whole Sherwood Forest area.

"As there is now only 10% of the heathland in Nottinghamshire as there was 100 years ago the funding was available for regeneration and as golf courses are a prime target as areas where heathland can be created."

There was a great deal of paperwork to produce in support of the club's bid for funding and Ryun spend a great deal of time reading up on the matter to make his case as strong as possible but he was rewarded with £70,000 over five years.

"There was more paper work involved than with the Stewardship scheme but with the Sherwood Forest Initiative lottery grant they were not looking for instant results."

The project which is on the 9 hole Commander Course involves the introduction of acid grasses - wavy hair grasses and fescues - while they are also scraping off top soil and putting down heather seed and brash.

"We are getting good results and a lot of germination which augers well for the project. It's hard work but we are getting there."

The team, there are six and a half staff members for the 27 holes on a huge site has also built around 30 new bunkers and renovated the remainder on the course as well as been involved in a drastic change to the day to day management programme of the course. In addition they have produced over a kilometer of buggy paths and some unobtrusive greenkeeper paths.

Despite all the design and building work carried out at the club Ryun still feels most proud of his course management success.

"I would say that the greatest achievement since I've been Course Manager has been to reduce disease by 100%. When I took over we were spraying fungicide once a month for Fusarium and Red Thread but after the first seven months we have only



Bunker before the improvements



Bunker after the improvements



Ryun stands on the tee of the par 3 he designed

sprayed once more.

"I changed the fertiliser programme from once in spring and again at the back end of the year to putting on a 13-0-46 mix once every five weeks, but at a very low rate - only about five bags for the 27 greens and putting green etc.

"I'm very much aware of the use of water and I've read a lot of Jim Arthur and agree with his thinking. We purchased a hollow corer and have increased the amount of aeration we do significantly. We hollow core twice a year, vertidrain once and needle tine through the summer and we've now got the greens in a healthy state."

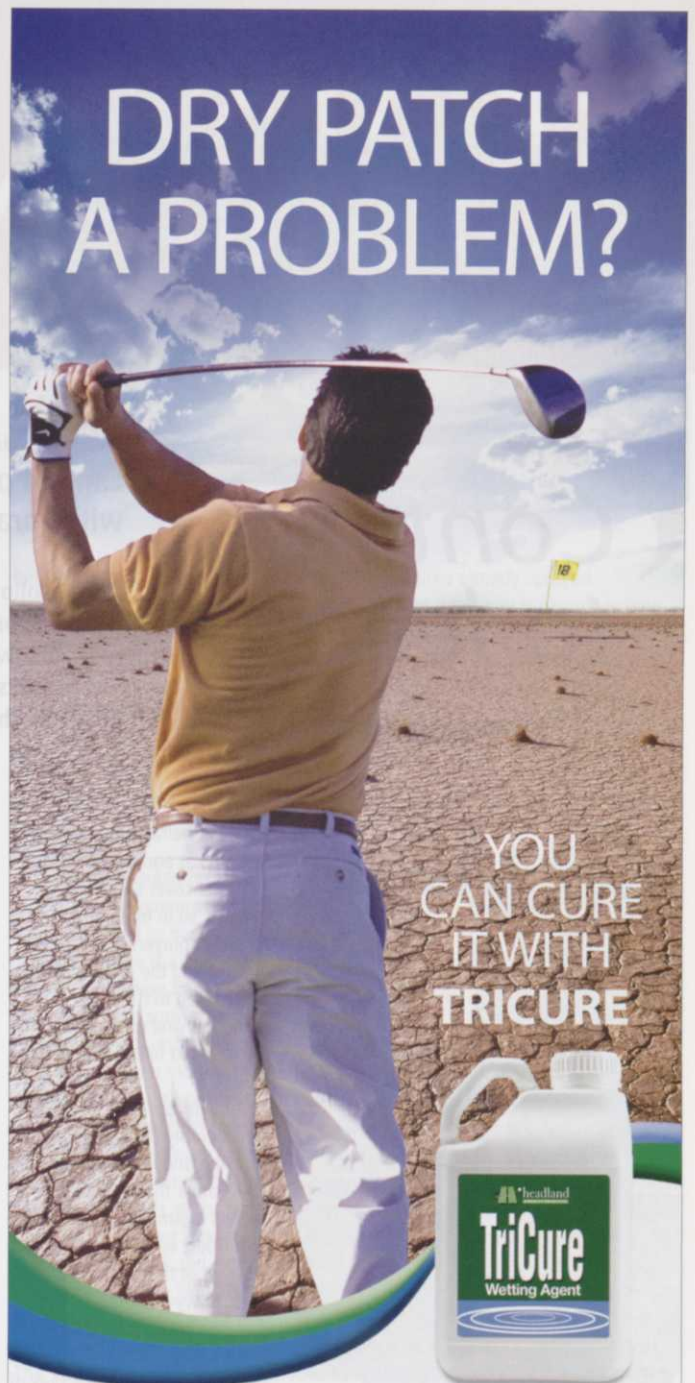
The club has a refreshingly positive way of looking at the game and thanks to Daryl is attempting to secure the membership of the future.

"We built an Academy for the professional staff complete with a long bunker which can take up to 10 at any one time for group lessons; a small chipping green; a deep and a shallow bunker and, of course, the floodlit driving range but we have also built a Tri Golf course for the under 5s.

"They use plastic clubs and big holes and the pros teach them rules and etiquette. We painted blue areas for water and brown for bunkers so that they can learn the rule for whatever situation they are in - two club lengths, dropping a ball etc. They are the members of tomorrow."

The feeling at Oakmere is of a club on the move - there are tentative plans for another nine holes upon which Ryun hopes to extend his design portfolio further - and while it will take time for many of the trees to establish themselves members and visitors can expect to see continuous on-going development and improvement.

Ryun's artistic ability was put to good use



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