

Course Feature

All is Well at Cumberwell

Scott MacCallum travelled to the west country to meet Marc Haring, Course Director at Cumberwell Park GC.



Cumberwell Park Golf Club, near Bath, was the brainchild of two local farmers and built on what had been agricultural land. In that regard it is a familiar tale of many golf developments constructed around the mid 90's. What might not be quite so common is the innovative manner in which the club has gone about ensuring that, in tough commercial times, it is still producing healthy profits year on year.

That undoubted success can be put down to several factors, principal among them a modern and flexible approach to club memberships and a "thinking outside the box" approach to the best course management practices.

One man who has had a significant influence in the success of the club is Marc Haring, who joined Cumberwell early in its construction.

Indeed, he welcomed the opportunity to work with the grow-in team but was a little shocked by the arduous nature of the work involved.

"It was early August and on the first day with them I started at 8am, which was like a lie in for me, but then we didn't break for breakfast until 1pm when we had 10 minutes; lunch was at 5pm when we had about 20 minutes and then we went straight through until it was way too dark to see. Then it was down the pub for eight pints of lager and bed ready for the same again the next day and that was 6 days a week."

The club opened with 18 holes in August '94 and attracted quite a few members but it was not until a few years later that the changes were made which have marked Cumberwell out from the norm.

"We had a management restructure and refocussed the overall goal of the club to become more commercially aware while at the same time still recognising that to make the place profitable we had to keep the customers happy," said Marc, a former Devon County player.

Prior to the changes the club had been run along more traditional lines, limiting society golf and priority to members.

"The new structure meant we no longer had a Secretary/Manager but a board of management which met once a month comprising the two owners, Adrian and Chris James; a Chairman, and the heads of the respective departments - the clubhouse, accounts, the Golf Director and myself," explained Marc, whose title changed from Course Manager to Course Director.

One of the initial decisions was to review the membership structure which to that point had included Platinum (Full) Membership; Gold (Five Day) Membership and Silver Membership which was £200 a year, plus a small green fee to be paid each time the course was played.

"When we analysed the income per round we were actually making most from the Silver members, even although the club was being run to favour the Platinum.

So we had a rethink and brought in an additional Bronze membership. It took the Silver a stage further and was £100 a year and £10 a round midweek and £12 at weekends. This was hugely successful because it meant people could suddenly join a golf club, have full member rights and the opportunity to get a handicap, for £100 a year," said Marc, who began his greenkeeping career at Stoke Poges and also spent time at Wentworth and Camberley Heath before moving to Cumberwell.

The decision to add the category was inspired and now, four years on, Cumberwell has a membership of over 1,300 of whom 250 are platinum; the five day category has closed and now has less than 100 while the Silver



The team with Marc centre in the dark jumper and Andy Parker on the extreme left

and Bronze account for the other 1,000 between them.

That has helped to maximise profit at the club as has another decision to target the winter as the time of year to maintain high quality playing standards.

"We are on an ex farmland clay golf course so we should, and did, struggle in the winter but we've come to the conclusion that anyone can fill out a golf course if the weather is fine but in the winter it's a different matter. If you are undecided and know that you'd be on 18 temporary greens or are going to get covered in mud you probably wouldn't bother.

So we made a conscious decision to improve the fairways through intensive drainage and gravel banding while at the same time targeting the greens to perform well in the winter.

"We are now open and in good condition 364 days a year (we close on Christmas Day). Last year for example we had two days on temporary greens and we play on even if it is frosty and don't suffer any detrimental effects," he explained.

Since making these changes Cumberwell Park has been very profitable throughout the winter months. I am responsible for keeping statistical data on all the rounds played at Cumberwell and present this at the monthly board meetings. When we analysed the data we realised that actually the time when the course is at its most busy is during the month of December. Of course daylight is limited in these months but we can be totally packed with green fee paying punters.

"The tougher the conditions the better it is for Cumberwell because golfers from other clubs visit because they know we will be in good condition when other courses - which operate to other agendas and perhaps target the summer months when competitions are held - are closed or are on temporary greens.

"Amazingly we found that our income from visitors went up substantially during the worst weather conditions."

So how does the course cope under winter conditions? "We have USGA greens and initially we ran with the established practice of feeding aggressively to establish the grass, building up a bit of resistance in the form of thatch to give 100% cover so we could keep the annual meadow grass and weed species off. It's an ok philosophy.

"Where we struggled was that we were getting wear - spike and pitch marks - on the soft growth and we were starting to have problems in the winter which, we started to recognise as a key period."

The solution came by chance and as a result of Marc, and his then team of three, attempting to prove a point.

"We had 220 acres to look after and were putting in 11 hour days in the summer and something had to give. We decided that we wouldn't maintain the putting green other than cutting it twice a week. We had the viewpoint that it would deteriorate because of lack of maintenance and that would prove our value.

"Unfortunately the opposite happened and when we came out of the winter I remember someone walking past as I was cutting the putting green saying that it was the best green on the course," said Marc, from

whom a technical knowledge was acquired through Food and Dairy Technology Diploma he gained before entering greenkeeping.

Marc then sat down with his Deputy and right hand man, Andy Parker, to discuss the issue and concluded that they may have hit upon something which could be transferred to the 18 greens on the course.

"We were both very experienced in all greenkeeping techniques and regularly visited other courses. We felt that we could tailor the traditional greenkeeping approach to our needs and so decided to give it a go. The critical thing was to stop feeding and by lowering nitrogen applications drastically we would create a tougher grass that would resist wear. And that's exactly what happened."

He does admit that there was a pain barrier through which they had to go before seeing the benefits.

"The greens were crying out for feed but because we weren't doing the rest of the maintenance programme such as scarifying and hollow tining we could still maintain a surface. The look of them was deteriorating but the playability was improving so we got away with it," recalls Marc, who now manages a well motivated team of 13, including two part time gardeners and two mechanics.

"Going into the winter there was still a lot of residual thatch which was breaking down and releasing nitrogen and in that first winter we did get a fair amount of disease but we stuck with it. Going into the summer we were in pretty good shape and began tailoring things a little more by doing some simple aerating, slit tining etc. We were cutting tighter because the grass was hardier and, as we weren't verticutting, we still had plenty of leaf material in the form of lateral growth. The grass was healthy and we were still maintaining the root growth."

The following winter the real benefits began to shine through. "We hardly fed at all that year. It was around 15 kilos per hectare, which is St Andrews like feeding, and we had the best putting surfaces you could ever imagine and suddenly the praise started to come in. We knew then that we were fine."

The breakthrough occurred around the time that they began constructing a further nine holes and Marc and the team were happy that they were moving in the right direction and applied the new practices to the new greens.

"We seeded them in August and nine days after the seed - and it wasn't pre-germinated - went down we were mowing. We cut it to 10 mm and it was like mowing a bunker, but we were confident that it would work.

"It has to be said that we fed aggressively but we use organic feed - Sustane which is an ideal product for our philosophy - and we lowered the height of cut by half a millimetre each week down to six mil which took us into the winter at the same height as the other 18 greens.

"When we hit the winter period we stopped feeding and the result was that in eight weeks the greens were totally established and became superb putting surfaces with good root growth, no thatch and a nice balance of bent and fescue. I feel that we have got everything working in harmony now. We never scarify or verticut or hollow tine but if you don't remove



anything you don't have to put much back in the way of fertiliser or additives of any kind."

Marc is indebted to agronomist, Robert Laycock, and a lecture which has remained with him that Robert gave at a recent Harrogate on the relationship between nitrogen and calcium in the grass plant.

"Basically if nitrogen is high, calcium is always low and if nitrogen is low, calcium is high. Calcium is the same for grass as it is for us in that it provides structural strength. In our case it is teeth and bones and in the grass plant it is the cell wall and it makes it much more resistant to not only wear but disease as well. Fusarium has to penetrate the cell wall to infect the plant and by creating the stronger cell wall you prevent that infection. We do not have fusarium. It is not a problem. We haven't sprayed in five years and I can't see us ever having to do it."

So what's the downside?

"There is always a compromise in greenkeeping if you



Excellent root development

do sometimes you pay for it somewhere else and we tend to suffer a little in March and April. Coming out of winter the greens are very hungry and start sending roots down at the expense to top growth and you tend to get very little grass at all. It means the surfaces are fast but a little bumpy. Also the greens don't always look that great visually and they can get quite firm in the summer but because we have big greens we can get away with it," explained Marc.

"All in all though, the benefits for us far outweigh these minor problems. Ask any greenkeeper and their problem time is the winter but in our case we can deliver the goods whatever the British climate throws at us.

However, he can also appreciate fully why other courses wouldn't follow the same path.

"If greens were predominately annual meadow grass and you put them under severe stress by reducing the nitrogen you'd be left with nothing. Golfers wouldn't tolerate it so I can understand other



greenkeepers not being in the position to go down that road. In that respect we've been very lucky.

"In fact, I have to say I have been very lucky all round. I've got no greens committees to worry about, a great team to make me look good and I am part of a forward thinking and highly successful golf club which is developing all the time.

As for the future for Cumberwell it includes another nine holes to give four loops of nine and a possible academy course, while the lovely stone built clubhouse is also to be extended.

With innovative thinking and a talented greenkeeping team the success of Cumberwell shows that clubs can thrive in these tough economic times.

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