

Course Feature

Meeting the Demands Head On
Scott MacCallum visits Tyneside Golf Club where the pressures on traditional golf clubs are being tackled admirably.



▲ The 11th

These are testing times for traditional British golf clubs. No longer can a Secretary merely cast his eye down the membership waiting list for a new candidate when a vacancy occurs. Golf Club waiting lists are now as rare as gross birdies in the Rabbits' Open while competition to attract societies is greater than ever. In fact every little edge has to be fought for to bring in additional revenue.

On top of that courses are played more regularly in all weathers and Health and Safety officers are no longer taking a relatively relaxed approach to issues at golf clubs.

Yes, the demands facing golf clubs are now more intense than ever but that needn't be bad news. Clubs can rise to the occasion and with hard work, an open minded approach to the job and well trained staff the satisfaction in facing up to these demands and gaining an edge over rivals is certainly there.

Tyneside Golf Club, sitting high above the famous river from which it takes its name and about seven miles from the centre of Newcastle, is a fine example of a traditional golf club which has faced up to those challenges and made the most of its situation.

Course Manager, Dave Simpson, and his team aim to ensure his members and visitors have the best possible conditions for all four seasons of the year. He has worked hard to ensure that the current course, designed by Harry Colt and laid out in 1903 meets the exacting examinations set by today's Health and Safety Executive. The club was actually formed in 1879 and played on a

course which is now Ryton Willows down the hill and closer to the Tyne.

When I visited the club, just after Christmas, Dave and his team were ready, waiting and a little disappointed that a hellishly wet day would not show off their course to its best. But they were well prepared as the first approach to feature Tyneside Golf Club in print was made 30 years ago! The previous Head Greenkeeper, Steve Pope, now enjoying an active retirement, renewed that original request when he met BIGGA's John Pemberton at a Section event last year. John passed on that request so it is the Tyneside Golf Club of January 2004, and not January 1974, which is featured.

"We're keen to produce as good playing conditions in winter as we possible can," said Dave smiling, as we looked out from the clubhouse at rain pounding the course. A golfer with any hint of sanity was finding something else to occupy his or her time on that Thursday morning.

"If we can pick up as much financial benefit as we can during the winter months, the time people would class as the quietest of the year, then it relieves a little of the burden in summer when, of course, we are still trying to maximise



▲ The Tyneside team with Dave Simpson centre

everything as much as possible," explained Dave.

He added that they were fortunate the course was laid out of sand and gravel, drained easily, and was often open when other courses in the area were forced to close.

"The whole game is now a lot more financially driven than it was before. The reason being we are now businesses as well as clubs and there is much more competition to survive.

"In the past courses more or less shut down in the winter months and were re-carved out in the spring. Nowadays we can't afford for that to happen and what is expected, and needed, is for there to be as near summer playing conditions as possible all year round which gives the golfer the feel good factor so they can enjoy their day's golf and go away with a feeling that they want to come back," said Dave, sounding more like the General Manager of a large golf hotel development than the Course Manager at a traditional members' club.

To illustrate his point he recalls the old days when a new set of flags, pins and hole cups, together with spruced up tee markers and other course furniture were introduced for the first major competition in the spring.

"We don't wait until things are old and in need of replacement now. We have new flags whenever they're needed and we try and maintain the standards of that first spring competition all year round."

"We've got members who would play seven days a week. If they were restricted to once a week, 52 games a year, they'd think their legs were cut off – 'Just 52 games? That's less than a month and a half!'"

Dave also uses all means at his disposal to help with agronomic and other course issues when it comes to identifying and solving problems.

"I use the magazine a lot for reference and through that and the Internet I contacted Kate Entwistle for help with a recent Fusarium problem Tyneside has shared with a great many clubs in recent months. Kate was absolutely superb and emailed me back with reassurance that we weren't doing anything wrong within our agronomic practices. It just shows how in the modern age you can tap into more avenues when you encounter issues.

The team also shows common-sense when it comes to the on-course work it does during periods of foul weather.

"On days like this we don't do anything on the course that involves machinery and things being transported over the course that would create more damage. We do work that is complementary to the weather."

A point emphasised by the fine brushwork and studied attention to detail one of the team had been displaying on tee markers back in the sheds earlier in the day.

To aid the year round condition of the course the club has introduced several "damage minimising" measures including teeing up on certain holes and the introduction of McDivot, divot anchors.

"One of our better golfers pointed out that as we use forward tees in the winter and a shortened course, balls are landing in the areas he would be landing in during the competition season in the summer and that those areas were becoming more damaged.

"That was part of the reasoning behind using the McDivots. Not only did it anchor divots down but when they were handed their pack of McDivots in the

Pro Shop it also encouraged people to thinking about their golf course," said Dave, whose own personal preference of mats has still to receive sufficient support from the membership to make it an option.

With a membership which includes a lot of older guys and a hilly, undulating course a no trolley policy is a non-starter at Tyneside.

"Some of the trolleys you see now are so big you could virtually sleep in them. They are unbelievable things for carrying a maximum of 14 clubs and lot of clubs have stopped them in the winter but it won't happen here. I tried it once and it lasted a day. It was just after Christmas, play was borderline and people were itching to get out. I said 'yes' to golf but 'no' to trolleys and added that I wouldn't be taking any machines out either. I got absolutely slaughtered," he recalled.

"That's fine, but people have to realise that for every action there is a reaction and that there were consequences to taking trolleys out in those conditions which we had to deal with months later."

Like a house of a certain age an older golf course does require on-going maintenance and the five strong team has been working hard over the winter on an issue on the 15th hole which had major health and safety consequences.

The hole boasts a ravine just in the ladies' and older male members landing area off the tee which has become steeper and steeper as the years have gone on.

"We cut it as semi rough and initially we could do it with a ride-on - rotary on the back of a tractor and then an out front rotary - but then the banks altered, became steeper and cavernous potholes began appearing. It became more and more dangerous to maintain," said Dave, who in the final stages was using a borrowed Ransomes Bobcat before deciding that the only way was strimming.

The team, along with Fosters Landscaping, has worked hard at re-contouring the entire ravine making it much safer to maintain while retaining the excellent feature it has always been.

"The membership are happy with how it looks and we will see what more is needed by way of contouring in the spring, then drill and seed it," said Dave, as he overlooked the work from the bridge spanning the ravine, installed by the army some years ago as an exercise.

The other major job the team carried out recently with health and safety issues was on the 14th which runs over a popular public footpath which winds its way down to the banks of the Tyne.

With the tee a mere 50 yards behind the path the dangers were obvious until the land tee-side of the path was raised to a height of nine feet, giving 100% protection to the public.

"It was originally built in the 50s but had become a practical but less than attractive feature," recalled Dave, who produced a report for the HSE detailing exacting mowing and transportation procedures for every hole on the course.

"Then there was a landslide and a huge crack appeared following a wet rainy summer about two years ago. The whole thing had to be redone and we got a contractor to pull the land back behind the upright concrete poles. We finished it with telegraph poles, which were in good supply at the time, and re-turfed the top."



▲ The 10th

The result is a very attractive professional job, fulfilling all the objectives of providing safe passage to the ramblers and dog walkers who use the path.

Dave, who is 39, became Course Manager, on Steve Pope's retirement in '95 having been Deputy. Prior to that he had worked as Deputy Course Manager at Washington GC, before that Ponteland GC and Newcastle United GC (a name the club had before the football club which is the object of the Toon Army's affections).

"I have a very good team, who, but for recent recruit Alex Wishart are trained to Level 3. Michael Gunn is my Deputy, Steve Richardson, the Mechanic/Greenkeeper, and Jeff Cullen.

As he ran through the names Dave highlighted their attributes and added that as a small team they all relied on each other to ensure success.

"To produce the goods you need a good team behind you who all have the knowledge. I'm a great believer in not holding anything back. I'm not a fly-off-the-handle guy and that means when mistakes are made, and they are, they come and tell me. If you are too autocratic you often don't get to find out what the problems are."

Dave and his team understand the demands of modern day greenkeeping at a traditional members' club and embrace the particular pressures such a combination brings.

"The industry is a lot more professional now than before and there are a lot of opportunities. I'm happy to stay in the industry and see it progress," concluded Dave.



▲ The 14th hole with the public path shielded by the recently refurbished wall of sleepers



▲ The remodelled ravine on the 15th hole

MACHINERY INVENTORY

- Ford 2120 Tractor c/w front loader
- John Deere 855 compact tractor
- John Deere 5300 tractor
- John Deere 3235A fairway mower
- John Deere 3235 B fairway mower
- John Deere 2653 utility mower
- John Deere Gator 6x4 diesel x2
- John Deere 2500 greens mower
- John Deere 800 aercore
- Toro GM3000D greens mower
- Toro 216D tees mower
- Kubota HR4600 turbo diesel rough cutter
- Allen 4-stroke hover mower
- 2 Allen 218si hover mowers
- 3 Komatsu strimmers
- Huxley soil reliever
- 1 Mountfield rotary mower
- 3 Ransomes auto certes
- 1 low loading trailer for Gator
- 3 ton tipping trailer
- Hardi AMK300 boom sprayer
- Hunter Juno cylinder grinder
- Brower turf cutter
- Howard Gem Rotovator
- Komatsu Hedge trimmer
- Sthill chamsaw
- 2 Submersible water pumps
- Petrol generator

A page from the Health and Safety guidelines produced by Dave and Michael showing the dos and don'ts for each maintenance operation

Hole Three

Tee
Main tee area cut using ride on triple mower. No sharp turning on main area or on sides. Sides of tee to be mown using flymo

Semi-rough.
Semi-rough on this hole is to be mown using semi-rough cutter. Ground speed appropriate to conditions. Care taken to avoid any notable hazards. Always cut up down any slopes rather than across.

Fairway.
The fairway is to be cut using the fairway ride on mower. All cut directions are permissible. Speed of cut to be appropriate to ground conditions. All turns to be at reduced speed fairway cut from end of carry to approach to green.

Approach.
This area to be cut using ride-on triple mower. Reduce speed and remain vigilant when cutting around bunkers and top of slope at rear of green.

Green
The greens mower is to be used for mowing greens only. Care to be taken on turning three point turns where turning would be tight. Slopes and bunkers around greens area to be avoided at all times.

Bunkers
If slope falls into bunker hand machines only to be used on slope. Bunkers sloping away from bunker may be cut around with ride-on mowers.

D.Simpson / M.Gunn March 03

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