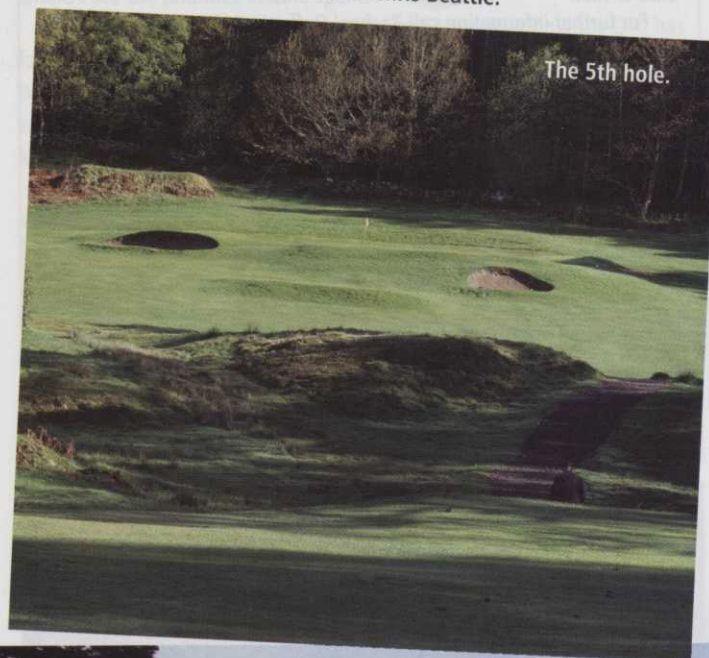


Course Feature

Aye, Aye Captain



▲ Ally Philp, seated, with Assistant Chris Beattie.



The 5th hole.

Ally Philp is Head Greenkeeper and, for the last two years, Captain of Comrie Golf Club as well. Scott MacCallum met with one of the most contented men in the industry on a wet day in Perthshire.

Bump into Ally Philp, Head Greenkeeper of Comrie Golf Club, in Perthshire, and more often than not he will have a smile on his face. Not just because he happens to work in one of the more attractive areas of the British Isles, but because he is immersed in a job he loves, doing it at a club in which he has more than just a vested interest.

This month Ally comes to the end of a two year stint as Club Captain, during which time he has seen the opening of a new clubhouse. Ally's period in office has also seen two of the club's younger members take impressive strides towards making an impact on the game, a key factor for which must lie in the lessons given to the local youngsters every Thursday in the playing season.

Ally assists the Assistant Pro from nearby Crieff Golf Club in this, educating the children on etiquette, bunker raking, pitchmarking and divot repairing, as well as passing on playing knowledge which comes with a 2 handicap. He is, after all, a 12 times Club Champion at Comrie.

It typifies what is perhaps the most impressive thing about Comrie Golf Club - how much the club is a part of the local community and how much responsibility the 470 members take for the successful running of the club.

When I arrived it had been raining for most of the morning, and the previous night, and the clubhouse was buzzing to the sound of the Senior and Ladies' teams taking part in an indoor putting competition as they had decided it was too wet to go out and play their charity match in aid of McMillan Nurses.

Indeed Ally's records show eight and a half inches of rain in August alone so the Comrie members' waterproofs have been well used this year already. "The course isn't closed. They've just decided not to go out," explained Ally quickly.

Comrie was opened in 1891 and redesigned by the great James Braid in 1924. In the clubhouse, opened by Colin Campbell, a Comrie man and Head Professional at Loch Lomond Golf Club, was at a table groaning under the weight of home made sandwiches, cakes, pastries and anything else designed to make a mouth water. I can personally vouch for the quality of the Lady Captain's bacon and egg flan.

Later, during the interview conducted in the men's locker room, one of the Senior members interrupted us to ask if he could do some Hoovering. You couldn't see that happening at Sunningdale or Muirfield.

"We had a vote when we came to deciding upon a new clubhouse and 99% of the membership were in favour and 99% were against having a bar in the new building," revealed Ally.

Although he was born and brought up in Comrie Ally has only been Head Greenkeeper for the last two and a half years, having previously been Head Man at another nine holer, St Fillans.

"The job actually became available while I was Vice Captain and, although I had reservations about applying because of that, I was encouraged to do so by other members and certainly haven't regretted it one little bit."

He has seen nothing but plusses through his dual role and has taken the opportunity to educate the membership on what he's been doing on the course and why he's been doing it.

"Members ask why I'm aerating and I explain why. Then they'll say 'But the greens are good', and I'll then say 'Well, why are they good?' As Captain they are more inclined to listen. I do get some criticism about pin placements and the like but I just rib them about not having anything else to talk about."

Before launching his greenkeeping career Ally had started an apprenticeship as a glass engraver with Stuart Crystal in Crieff.

"I was made redundant and told I could either leave at the end of the week or straight away. I walked up to the golf club to speak to my dad, who was an assistant at Crieff, and told him I'd been made redundant. The Head Greenkeeper overheard me and asked if I wanted a summer job so I started there."

Ally has chaired all the club committee meetings for the last two years but, although he can contribute to the discussions, as an employee, he doesn't vote on matters.

"In two years I can say there has been no real conflict in my dual role. Sometimes when I'm out on the course I can be called in to take a phone call but the Club Manager, Steve van der Walt, has been very good at handling most things and I am really just a figurehead."

Listen to Ally and you hear the voice of a contented man, but it masks the fact that working at Comrie is no walk in the park. Indeed with a staff of two, including Ally, the job very much resembles that of a hamster on a wheel.

"It's non stop. We don't get paid overtime, just time off in lieu which can be very difficult to fit in. Although we're not compelled to by our contracts we don't take holiday in May, June, July, August or the beginning of September as there is just so much to do."

The situation is compounded if Ally or his recently-qualified Assistant, Chris Beattie, are ill. Fortunately Ally has only had one day off sick in 20 years but Chris, who joined the staff initially on a part time basis, but then full time last year was off this summer for a few days with an injury.

At a stroke this severely increased Ally's workload and reduced what could be done on the course for a key period in the summer.

The nature of the never ending hard graft is graphically illustrated by Ally as he runs through a regular week at Comrie.

"Monday is Medal day here so I'll change holes and cut fairways and Chris will cut greens and rake the bunkers and then we'll divot fill all the tees. Then it's lunch after which we'll cut rough and do our strimming and flymowing."



▲ The clubhouse from the 2nd green.



▲ The 7th hole.



Players on the 8th tee.



The view of the 3rd hole from the tee.



The 3rd hole.



The 3rd green.



Players on the 6th green.



"The Seniors have a 9am Shotgun start every Tuesday with the Ladies medal that afternoon which means a rush to get all the jobs done. If the Seniors have a home match that's another shotgun start on a Thursday," said Ally, who added that being a nine holer means that it is more difficult to keep out of the way of play than an 18 hole course.

It does mean that there are many jobs which they'd like to do but through lack of manpower and finance these have to be put on hold.

"If Chris and I were to rebuild a bunker we'd hire a digger and buy in rootzone and turf and it would take us about four to five days per bunker on top of the regular work we'd still be doing"

But it is the tees which Ally sees as the job he'd like completed in the medium to long term.

"A lot of our tees are uneven so I'd like to rebuild and enlarge them," said Ally.

Adult members of Comrie pay £145 annual subs currently so there isn't a huge sum of money coming into the club each year, but the members do hold fund raising events and among the beneficiaries is a Course Development Fund.

"It may be we'd have to look to increase the subs if we had a particular project we wanted to do," admitted the Club Captain.

But Ally is a pragmatist and knows that, like most courses, he is judged on the quality of the greens.

"You don't get people saying 'Have you seen Comrie's tees?'. It's greens we're all judged on so that's what I spent most of my time improving since I got here."

A dedicated follower of Jim Arthur - who visited the course in 1980/82 - Ally still keeps the reports Jim produced at home. He has a minimalist approach to course management and aerates the greens every two to three weeks, which has improved the quality of grass coverage in the time he has been there.

Such is the way with small courses Ally calls on the services of colleagues at other courses to help, or members have also been on hand to help.

"For example, Charlie McDonald, at Crieff Golf Club, vertidrains for me once or twice a year and in return he borrows our vibrating rollers and pro seeder.

"It works very well, while our local Toro dealer, Henderson Grass Machinery, at Kinross, are excellent and take account of us being a small nine holer when it comes to doing business."

In addition to the double compaction and wear and tear a nine holer experiences Comrie is a moorland course which suffers from not having much depth to its soil - three inches on one of the fairways with rock just below the surface.

"When changing holes you need a pinch bar as well as a hole cutter as you do hit stones and have to lever them out as you go round."

But whatever the obstacles Ally and Chris face they do produce a golf course which is a test for the best, including two youngsters who have already made a splash in the game. Wallace and Carly Booth are a talented brother and sister team of whom a great deal is expected.

Both learned their golf at Comrie and now Wallace is on a golfing scholarship in Augusta, Georgia, while 12 year-old Carly has already made headlines by playing in a pro-am with Sandy Lyle and has all the attributes to go a long way in the game.

It's feeling he's had some input in the development of the young golfers of the town as well as providing an excellent test of golf for the members... not to mention that bacon and egg flan, that helps to keep Ally smiling.

Inventory of Equipment at Comrie Golf Club

- 1 Tym T431 tractor
- 1 Kubota B2150 tractor with front loader
- 1 Toro 3200-D - Greensmaster
- 1 Toro 2300-D - Reelmaster
- 1 Toro 3000- Greensmaster
- 1 Ransomes Super Certes handmower
- 1 Groundsman 460 HD
- 1 Allan National Banks mower
- 3 True surface vibratory rollers

- 3 Toro verticut units
- 1 SISIS outfield spiker
- 1 Disc Aerator
- 1 Kawasaki blower
- 1 Allen flymo
- 1 Stihl brushcutter
- 1 Pedestrian walkover sprayer
- 1 Birchmeier 20litre knapsack
- 2 cyclone spreaders, 1 pedestrian, 1 tractor mounted
- 1 1.2m pro seed
- 1 Marston trailer
- 1 Rotary Deck
- 1 set Allet gang mowers