

# Course Feature

## Buying into the Game

Scott MacCallum meets David Croxton, a man who not only bought his own golf club but has risen to become Chairman of the EGU's Golf Services Committee.



Do you remember a guy called Victor Kiam? He was the bloke who "liked it so much I bought the company". From recollection I think it was back in the 70s and the "it" he was referring to was an electric razor and the "company", Remington.

I mention this because David Croxton, was a member of Cold Ashby Golf Club, in Northamptonshire, liked it so much he bought it. Since then he has developed the course to the stage that it is an extremely popular venue with three loops of nine and an attractive clubhouse, while David has risen through the ranks of the English Golf Union and last year was appointed Chairman of the Golf Services Committee. He is also the EGU representative on the GTC. Oh yes, he has also done his bit for the British winter Olympics effort!

He is therefore a pretty rare beast, A golf administrator who is also very much at the sharp end of the game, experiencing first hand the effects of the game's peaks and troughs.

"The club had been up for sale for some time when I thought I'd put an offer in for it. I did have a certain amount of business experience but I hadn't been involved in golf at all and I was taking over a business which had been struggling financially which was the only reason I was able to buy it," recalled David, as we sat in his office overlooking the course.

So what was the magic ingredient? What was it that turned the club around and turned David into a successful golf club owner?

"We started smiling at people," said David.

"People appreciated the fact that we'd taken time out to learn their names and to improve the basic services like providing bacon sandwiches in the mornings."

At the time, by David's own admission, facilities at Cold Ashby weren't brilliant, with the clubhouse an old converted farmhouse offering fairly basic amenities, but the 300 members were made to feel welcome and the club began to grow.



"We built the membership up to around 500 by the mid 80s when golf was enjoying a boom time and we added nine more holes giving us three loops of nine in 1995 when more land became available," said David.

Another measure of the distance in which Cold Ashby has come is the club magazine "Tee Break" an issue of which features snooker world champions, Peter Edbon and reigning champ, Shaun Murphy, who played the course in a charity event last summer.

David is delighted with the expansion of the course from 18 to 27 holes as, not only did it make it much easier to accommodate corporate or society days without causing disruption to his own members, there was another huge benefit as well.

"It was a lot better for greenkeeping. We have a routine - although it doesn't always work - that we close nine holes every Monday for hollow-coring, or top dressing and it means that we still have 18 holes to offer the golfers," explained David.



Greg Croxton is a partner in the business





"It means that in theory every nine holes is worked on every three weeks but in reality with conflicting demands, competitions etc, they are probably done once a month and we have seen the benefits of this regime through a lot less thatch," said David, who has a close working relationship with Course Manager, Henry Bott, and his team.

"Members don't even know we've micro tined and top dressed by the Wednesday after it's been done."

David has watched golf hit a popularity peak in the mid 80s and then tail off again but he does feel that the game is beginning to make a come back.

"If fees are pitched at the right level there are probably more golfers out there now than ever before but they are a floating group which makes budgeting more difficult. However it is a business and you've got to be prepared to adapt. It wouldn't be right to think you could rely on green fee income but in reality it is fairly predictable," he revealed.

"Indeed the good news is that green fee income has gone up by round 50% in the last five years."

The best scenario is having members as this gives a regular income at the beginning of the financial year but more golfers are looking at alternatives and Cold Ashby have recently introduced a Lifestyle membership for which a member pays a reduced subscription at the beginning of the year and a reduced green fee every time he or she plays.

"It is ideal for those who want to be a golf club member and have a handicap but don't play too often."

Talking of predictability and the ability to adapt, it is anything but a predictable experience when you walk into the Cold Ashby maintenance facility as figuring alongside the usual greenkeeping kit are rows and rows of skis, ski boots and poles.

The course is blessed with some glorious slopes and a decision was

taken to install a drag lift at the top of the 18th fairway and provide the equipment necessary for anyone wishing to take advantage of snowy conditions.

"We've had some super days skiing here in recent years and the 18th fairway is long enough to provide some fun," said David, of an excellent way of ensuring a golf course is used at times when otherwise the outside facilities on a golf course would be, to keep the winter analogy alive, "in cold storage".

With David's son and business partner, Greg, taking on more of the responsibility of managing Cold Ashby on a day-to-day basis it has allowed him to take an increasing role within the English Golf Union to the stage that he was appointed the Chairman of the influential Golf Services Committee.







"Back in the mid 90s I was asked to serve on the Northamptonshire Executive and through that someone asked me if I'd become President of the county, which I did from 1998 to 2000. That led on to representing Northamptonshire on the EGU Executive and then Colin Spurr, currently EGU Chairman, and then Chairman of the Golf Services Committee asked me on-board. That's when I really got more involved and when Colin moved up I became Chairman, which has a four year term of office."

The Golf Services Committee is there to handle any club management or course management issues that the EGU feels it should tackle, which currently include advising clubs on whether they should become community amateur sports clubs which give tax benefits; the retention of membership and how to cope with declining waiting lists and cash income.

"I suppose it all came about from being asked questions. Clubs would ring up if they'd had a problem and ask the EGU for help, as with the recent licensing law changes," explained David.

"It's all about providing a service to golf clubs. We field whatever queries we can ourselves and pass on those without our expertise to consultants or experts in the field whether it be in licensing law or tax. If we are getting a series of calls on the same subject we will look to put on a seminar to cover the issues."

During the golf boom of the mid 90s the EGU, like other golfing bodies including BIGGA, were getting calls from farmers and prospective developers thinking about building golf courses and asking how to go about it.

"We tried to bring out some of the issues and help people avoid some of the many pitfalls.

"That led on to the time when the GTC was set up part funded by the EGU. We have a seat on the Committee and through that work closely with BIGGA and the R&A."

Having, as Chairman of the Golf Services Committee, taken the decision to sit on the GTC himself he has seen at much closer hand the work that goes on.

"I give BIGGA the credit for taking the early lead in greenkeeper training. In reality it was greenkeepers providing their own training. If you were to go into any other industry how often is it the worker who trains himself - it is the employers' responsibility."

That is a point which David is keen to promote.

"I think training is something for which we as the EGU representing the employers together with other employer organisations should take more responsibility and that it should be done through the GTC. A lot of the credit for greenkeeper training falls to BIGGA, and the trade, who pay for a







lot of it through sponsorships, because if they hadn't done it probably wouldn't have been done."

David is full of praise for greenkeeper training for those at the beginning of their career but that there is still work to be done for those chasing education and training further up the career ladder.

"Training at the lower end, basic skills, level is pretty good and fairly readily available and well organised in greenkeeping, but get further up into the management and degree levels and there is still lots to be done to provide Course Managers with the opportunities of getting quality and relevant qualifications," opined David.

He is full of praise for those Course Managers who have taken the initiative to improve their education and the benefits this has had on the profession.

David has really enjoyed his involvement with the GTC and the EGU and in particular the Road Shows he has been chairing.

"I've been lucky enough to meet people like Gordon McKillop, Bob Taylor and Lee Penrose of the STRI, as well as the likes of George Shiels and Andy Cole. I spent an hour listening to Andy last Monday and another hour listening to George on Tuesday and I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't been chairing the day so my own knowledge is increasing all the time. It has certainly helped me pick up a few things.

Like Mr Kiam David is surely delighted at how things have progressed since he bought the company.



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QUALITY GOLF COURSE SIGNAGE