

# Course Feature

## Golf. The Future?

Scott MacCallum travels to north London to see a complex which might just kick start a new wave of young golfers and gives more playing opportunities for the more time-poor player.

If I'm struggling to sleep - tossing and turning about how to make Greenkeeper International a better read - I often play a round of golf in my head. I might start on the 1st of the Old Course, St Andrews and take in the best holes in the world of golf until I nod off usually about three under par with four to play.

Greg Evans, Course Manager at the new Northwick Park complex in Harrow, North London, doesn't need to close his eyes to imagine such an eclectic course - he's looking after some of the finest holes in golf every day of the week.

Northwick Park, in sight of the new Wembley Stadium, is a revolutionary new venture, designed to open golf up to a wider participating audience and provide a solution to those who feel the game takes up too much of their time.

The complex boasts a two tier driving range; restaurant cum coffee shop and bar; gym, baseball batting cages; enormous golf shop; a state-of-the-art short game practice area; five coaching studios; children's course; an adventure/crazy course and, of course, those famous holes.

The six hole course - there are actually eight, but two are rested on a weekly basis - offer golfers the rare chance to pit their wits against the challenges that face the biggest names in golf.

Let's just run through them. The 1st is the par-3 6th at the Riviera Country Club in the US, with its famous bunker in the centre of the green; the 2nd in a shortened version of the 16th at Ganton; the 3rd is the par-3 6th at Oak Hill, where Costantino Rocca made a hole-in-one during the '95 Ryder Cup match; the 4th is modelled on a traditional Gleneagles fairway with the 9th green at The Belfry; the 5th swaps between the 12th at Royal Birkdale and the 8th at Royal Troon - the world famous Postage Stamp, while the 6th flips between those two frightening par-3s on Augusta's back nine, the 12th and 16th.

Northwick Park is owned by Playgolf, which has traditionally been a driving range operator, and was the brainchild of Peter McEvoy and Ricky



Northwick Park greenkeeping team

Willison. Peter, the legendary British Amateur, is the last amateur to make the cut at The Masters and inspirational Walker Cup Captain while Ricky is a former Walker Cup player and European Tour player who is now pro at Ealing Golf Club, the club where, Greg, the new Course Manager is a member.

The initial spark for what has become known as Urban Golf came from Ricky who visited a golf complex while playing a tournament in South Africa.

"He paid a fee and spent most of the day practicing and thought it was a great idea," explained Greg, no mean golfer himself as a former winner of The Berkshire Trophy, the English Champion of Champions and member of the England "B" squad.

Ricky then discussed his ideas with Peter and they took the idea to



1st green and fairway - Riviera Country Club in the US



What the site looked like before work started on the 1st

Playgolf who had purchased the old rubbish tip on which Northwick Park now exists and which was earmarked for a more conventional range and short course.

Peter and Ricky's enthusiasm for the project, experience and skill sold the idea to Playgolf and they then set about designing the golf course on land that to the untrained, even trained, eye offered little by way of clue as to what might be possible.

"They walked the site and saw a mound and Peter suggested that it could be the mound to the left of The Postage Stamp and they moved on from there," explained Greg.

"Peter wanted an Augusta element to the course and also a Ganton hole, as that was where he had captained the Walker Cup team to victory. The rest fell into place based on the knowledge they had of holes around the world. They wanted the Riveira Country Club hole as the bunker in the middle of the green is such a distinctive feature."

St Andrews has not been forgotten as there is a tribute to the Road Hole green, complete with Road Hole bunker, on the short game area.

Prior to taking over, Greg was self employed to give himself enough opportunities to play amateur golf, when Ricky introduced him to Playgolf who offered him the chance of becoming Course Manager.

"I saw it as a challenge and a fresh new idea and I was keen to become involved."

He joined just after the course had been constructed by Midland's-based Delta Golf and seeded and he started putting a greenkeeping infrastructure into place.

"I was on my own for six months then employed Warren Clements, from Ealing GC, as my Deputy six months later, two more staff followed in the autumn of 2004 and then a further four last summer," said Greg, adding that four of his staff are Polish.



The 5th - Royal Troon and Royal Berkdale



Would you believe that this is now the 4th!

"The team is superb. They all work hard and learn quickly which has been important as some of them didn't know anything about golf when they started. It has only been since last November, and the grand opening, that we have had golfers on the course so they have had to learn rules and etiquette. This, in itself, has helped me become a more effective communicator and manager.

"It has been a great experience for me setting up the team and ensuring everything has been put in place with regard to machinery, maintenance facilities, policies etc."

The team is worked extremely hard as tees and greens are hand cut - there are eight greens on the course plus the equivalent of several more on the practice green and short game area, while there are 26 bunkers on the course plus another six in the practice area.

They also have to collect balls from the driving range - up to 40,000 while they are also responsible for the other outdoor areas including the baseball cages.

"We top dress and verticut on a weekly basis but it can be difficult on the fairways as the course sits on four inches of sand with rubbish underneath. You can be digging up iron bars and all sorts of things.

"Golf starts at 8am and will go on until dusk - play will be limited to 200 rounds a day at 15 minute intervals - so we have to have everything done before the start as you can't do the front nine first when there is only six holes and everyone is round in an hour."

The greens are all built to USGA specification, sown with creeping bent (G6) while the fairways are a mixture of rye grass and fescue. Each hole is presented in the style which befits the nature of the course it came from. The 1st has rye grass fairways and sports a diamond cut; 2nd is fescue and cut half and half and receives very little feeding with gorse to give it the inland links look; the 3rd and 4th are rye and diamond cut the two 5ths



The 4th - 9th green at the Belfry

## Course Feature

receive no feeding and are cut half and half while the 6th Augusta holes are diamond cut with the greens striped while in the winter there are artificial azaleas and rhododendrons until the real McCoy develop and the seven pine trees were moved from the short game area and need daily watering. There are also three types of sand been used - PS White, Leighton Buzzard Medium and Silver White, brought in from Plymouth.

"The links bunkers have been revetted, it was taken on as an in-house project, but we are discovering that they are still settling. Other problems are being caused on the Riviera bunker with the green suffering from sand blast and people taking divots," said Greg, who added that the entire complex is contained within 33 acres.

"The creeping bent has been superb. It was germinating within five days of it being sewn and after two months we were cutting at six mil. It is very labour intensive - we poa pick the greens after every cut a job that takes about five minutes per green - but it produces superb putting surfaces."

The team is also working hard to improve the collars where initially seed had become mixed in. A two year programme involving the Graden, hollow coring and overseeding has been instigated.

Agronomist John O'Sullivan, from Ireland, has been retained to assist with any problems with the creeping bent as he has experience based on his time as Superintendent at Waterville and Druid's Glen.

"Other courses with creeping bent in this country include The Grove and The Wisley and they are top quality venues which regular golfers would struggle to get on. People can come here, pay and play and experience the greens," said Greg, who added that he played his greens a couple of weeks before and is convinced there would be none quicker in the country.

Indeed, Middlesex County Union are to base themselves at Northwick Park, a move assisted by Greg, a former Middlesex County Champion.

"We only previously had one practice facility in the county and I used to practice on the 13th green at Ealing, having to move when golfers arrived. I think our practice facilities are on a par with those at Woodhall Spa (the EGU's National Golf Centre)."



The 6th - the 9th and 12th at Augusta

The nature of the course is that temporary greens won't be possible and although Greg has closed the course for frost in the time the course has already been open he is sure there will be pressure on him to keep them open all year round in the future.

What struck me when I arrived at the Centre, and its leisure centre-style reception facing the two tiered glass backed driving range and flanked by the restaurant and coffee shop on one side and the golf shop on the other was the enthusiasm being shown by the young clientele.

It was half term and the place was full of young children from every ethnic background, dressed as young kids do, in tracksuits, baggy trousers or football tops, some wielding baseball bats and helmets and others carrying golf bags and clubs. The range was full and while the quality of the golf swings would have David Leadbetter waking up in a cold sweat they were all enjoying the game of golf as their parents or guardians enjoyed a latte or a glass of wine. It was as far removed from the conventional scene at a traditional golf club as it is possible to be and might just open the door to many more new golfers.

"Playgolf are hoping to open another in Glasgow and Cardiff has also been mentioned. It is urban golf and I think there is a big future in it," said Greg.

In the meantime he will enjoy his trip around the world every time he walks his special little course.



The 5th at Royal Troon's world famous Postage Stamp