



A SWISS ROLE

Think of Switzerland and what comes to mind? Well, skiing and the Alps, obviously; then there're banks, watches and cuckoo clocks; not forgetting, chocolate, Swiss rolls and Swiss Army knives. Oh there is the country's famous neutrality and the bizarre fact that, as a land-locked nation, they've won yachting's America's Cup twice!

Golf doesn't exactly figure on many lists. Tennis is up there with Roger Federer and Martina Hingis, but can you name a Swiss golfer?... No, didn't think so.

However, golf is thriving in Switzerland and one British Course Manager, Steven Tierney, who has spent 20 years in Switzerland certainly wouldn't want to ply his trade anywhere else.

And it's hard to argue as you sit on the Golfpark Nuolen clubhouse balcony gazing at Lake Zurich in one direction and the Alps in the other – the course is just a kilometre from the foothills.

Those of you who entered the inaugural BIGGA Golf Photographic Competition may now be feeling a little bit cheated. Steven won with a superb picture of hills reflecting off a lake – not the Alps nor Lake Zurich incidentally, but another view of the course – but let's face it, it wasn't just run of the mill scenery he had to choose from.

A Lancastrian, originally from Bolton, Steven first moved to Switzerland as an 19 year-old with a wanderlust, having written to a number of golf course architects asking for work and then handing in his notice at Fulford, in York.

"Donald Harradine replied and put me in touch with a little nine hole project in Switzerland. Ian Tomlinson, who was then working in Switzerland, came to Fulford and talked to me about the job. The Secretary at Fulford was a super guy who was impressed that I was planning to work abroad, and said he would hold my job open for me for a few months if it didn't work out. That gave me a real feeling of not burning my bridges," recalled Steven, who has a photograph sitting on his desk of his footballer father getting the better of Sir Stanley Matthews in front of 80,000 fans at the old Bolton Wanderers ground.

That feeling of security was all the more important when he arrived in Switzerland to be told by the owner that the original Head Greenkeeper

wasn't now coming and that he would be Head Greenkeeper. It was the original Jacques Cousteau or Mark Spitz (sink or swim) situation and it turned out to be the making of him. He did return to Fulford but only as a visitor, happy to let people know that his move was working out well. So 20 years on and with ten years under his belt at Golfpark Nuolen what is working life like 690 metres above sea level?

Well one thing is for sure, commitment and hard work are prerequisites of working in Switzerland, but the rewards are there.

"The guys work an average of 450-500 hours overtime from Easter until the end of October, our regular working season," explained Steven.

Incidentally, as a non EU country the Working Hours Directive doesn't apply to Switzerland.

"Our regular day starts at around 5.30am when we go through the day's programme. We normally have the machines out by 6am. There is a half hour break at 9am where the team meets up at the clubhouse for coffee and then work until noon when we stop for lunch for an hour. Then we work from 1pm through to our regular finishing time of 6pm but there are many occasions, yesterday being one of them, when one of the team has said he wanted to work on 'til 8pm to finish off some rough cutting.

"We also do double shifts on the weekend, depending on tournaments when you will perhaps do a Saturday morning and a Sunday morning while others do Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon. You get one weekend off a month," said Steve.

However, there are compensations for such an intense and demanding working schedule.

Because snow and skiing replaces golf from around November until around February or March, Steve and his team take three months off over the period. They complete their machinery servicing and seasonal jobs in November and the first part of December and are officially off from December 15. The good part is that they are retained on the pay roll over this extended break. The even better part is that they generally get, not one but two month's bonus pay. The unbelievable bit is that the tax rate where Steve and the team works is 2.5%. Oh yes, the club's

parent company, concrete producer, Kibag, owns its own little stretch of beach on Lake Zurich and employees can pop along and make use of their own barbecue and beach hut.

“It is quite standard in Switzerland for people to get paid 13 months of the year and often there is a bonus month on top of that, so we are generally working nine and a half, ten months at the absolute maximum, and getting paid 14 months,” said Steve, who paid a higher rate of tax for the first three years he was in Switzerland.

Switzerland is home to many high earning sports and show biz stars because of the favourable taxation policies. Among those living around Lake Zurich are Jackie Stewart, Kimi Raikkonen, Nick Heidfeld and Felipe Massa from Formula 1; Roger Federer and Martina Hingis; while Tina Turner, David Bowie, Shania Twain and Michael Schumacher live on Lake Geneva.

Despite not being recognised for its golfing heritage there is a very high expectation level from Swiss golfers.

“They expect high standards because so many of them are cosmopolitan, very well travelled and have played top courses in other parts of the world and they expect the same at home. Our course is pay and play but a lot of our members come from the Zurich banking community and play a lot in the US. We also have a regular who is a member at Alwoodley, in Leeds, while there are often groups who take golfing holidays to Scotland and the like.”

Each year Steve’s target is to have the course ready for play two weeks after the official snow melt.

“We generally know when that is because the temperature can rise from -20 to +15 in three days and while it can snow again it generally doesn’t stay long and the snow melt is usually in late February or early March.”

Snow mould is the main problem – a nasty disease with many similarities to fusarium.

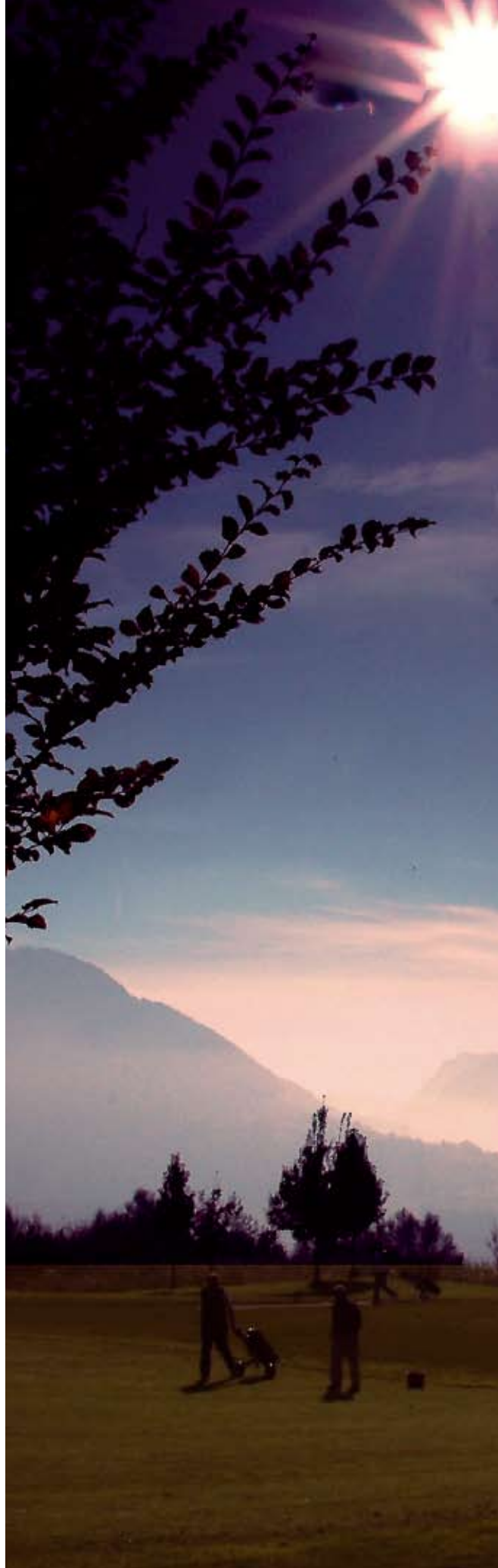
“It is always a problem if the snow, and it can be up to two metres deep, comes before the ground has frozen. If the ground has frozen you can be pretty sure you are not going to have a problem but we often take a shovel to remove some snow just to see how it is.

“If you have snow mould and you can get 80% infection the first thing we’ll do it double verticut everything to rip the old stuff out then, and I know it goes against basic greenkeeping principles, we fertiliser the whole course. You’ve got to give it a wake up with a bit of quick release to get a bit of colour.”

Another major difference between course management in Switzerland and the UK is the level of Governmental input and inspection on the country’s 84 golf courses.

“Every golf club in the country has a designated Government-appointed Environmental Officer and we have to provide an annual report to the Government and local council. Last year we produced a 300 page inventory of all plants and insects on the golf course,” explained Steven, who added that one of the regulations in place meant that they weren’t allowed to cut their flower meadows each year until after June 15.

The regular twice yearly meetings are not something that Steven worries about particularly as he works closely with his environmental officer, a local man who works for the World Wildlife Fund, ensuring that there is no chance of incurring the wrath of the Government, although he knows of one golf development which was closed down for five years because of a breach of a law.





One of the initiatives which have been put in place at the behest of the official can be seen alongside the road on the top side of the course. A fence runs alongside the road and there are buckets sunk into the ground just inside the boundary.

“We have to check them daily for frogs and then take them across the road and release them. The same goes on the other side, for frogs wishing to come in our direction. It’s to stop them being hit by cars,” he explained, with studies demonstrating a two way passage for the frogs wishing to lay eggs in the golf course lake.

“We keep records and we will probably transport over 2700 frogs and salamanders in the course of a season.”

One of the problems of a country with only 84 courses is that there is only one dealer per manufacturer to cover the whole country and rep visits are fairly intermittent. With that in mind Steve and his team retain an extensive workshop of spares and utilise the manufacturer websites for advice wherever possible.

The golf course is built on an old gravel pit for which the option was given for it to be a rubbish dump or a recreational area.

“There was zero chance of getting planning approval for a rubbish dump and one of our Directors, who played golf in Florida, suggested a public pay-and-play golf course and this won approval from the planners.”

Designed by Peter Harradine, the course was built in-house using the vast array of earth moving machines owned by Kibag, with Conor Nolan, now of the STRI, as Construction Supervisor. Steven arrived towards the end of the construction process.

What was produced was an excellent 9 with another 9 in the early stage of construction - another 9 will follow later - and a superb nine hole pitch and putt course. The quarry, which ironically doesn’t produce any sand usable for golf courses, sits at the top of the site and a conveyor belt runs the entire length of the golf course down to a store, either above or below ground, and Steve is particularly proud of the six tunnels he helped to build to enable golfers to play over the belt.

“That was a great experience and they are six years old now and no-one has fallen down one yet!”

So what advice would he give anyone wishing to follow him down the route of working abroad?

“I think it is very difficult to bring out an established family. When you are a greenkeeper it is very easy, you are at work all day and have a job to do. Your partner is at home, probably not speaking the language, and that can be very difficult in a foreign place with the days so long. You’ve already heard about the work ethic and commitment in time which is required,” said Steve, whose wife, Claudia, is Swiss while their two sons, Patrick and Jan, were born in Switzerland.

“You must also learn the language. I’ve never had a language lesson in my life, just help from my wife. My German is still laughable at times but people understand me and they do appreciate people making the effort,” said Steve, who actually speaks four languages and admits to thinking in German.

You might be tempted to work abroad but there are sacrifices to be made and work to be done if you are to become a successful ex-pat.

Oh, I can help you with a Swiss golfer if the question were to come up at an interview. Andre Bossert, who won the Cannes Open on the European Tour in 1995.