

No Introduction Necessary

Scott MacCallum meets BIGGA's new Chairman, Billy McMillan – a man who could be known as Number 20.

It is often said, when introducing someone who everyone knows, that, "They need no introduction..." but then the person is given one anyway. I'm going to fall into that very same trap when I say, "BIGGA's new National Chairman needs no introduction." You'll understand what I mean when I explain that the man who took over the Chairmanship of the Association from Richard Whyman at the AGM last month is Billy McMillan, Course Manager at Tyrrells Wood Golf Club, in Leatherhead, Surrey, and a member of the most famous family in greenkeeping.



Meet the Chairman

In being appointed Chairman Billy becomes the first son to follow father and in much the way George W. Bush is referred to as "43" and his father, George Bush Snr, as "41", in terms of US Presidents, we could call Billy "20" and his dad, Jack, "2". The Duracel battery-operated former Sunningdale Course Manager, and current European Tour Consultant, was the second Chairman of the Association in the late 80s.

"When Richard asked me I was quite humbled and very honoured to have been asked. It's very personal, done by phone call rather than a letter, and you're given time to think about it, because you do need time to reflect and take stock, as well as put the support networks in place that you are going to need during the tenure of Chairmanship," explained Billy, as we sat in his office overlooking an extremely windy Tyrrell's Wood.

In the end he took about three weeks before committing, not because he had any doubts about taking on the role, but to ensure he had the full support of all concerned before accepting.

"Your heart says to take it straight away but your head urges you to check everything out first. I also sought advice for previous Chairmen, as well as John Pemberton at BIGGA HOUSE, on the amount of time that is required to devote to the role and then armed with this information took it to the golf club so they were well aware of what it would entail," he said, adding that when it comes to priorities the golf club's needs would always take precedence.

Billy has spoken to his dad about his new role, and Jack and his mum, Rita, are extremely proud of their son's new Association role.

"He was particularly chuffed that I'd been asked and I'm proud of what he and the Walters (Woods) of this world have done for greenkeeping. We were very lucky to have the calibre and profile of people around in those early days and that they had the time and energy required to move the Association forward. We owe them a great debt of gratitude for their

courage, foresight and wisdom because without them we wouldn't be as strong an Association today."

As you can well imagine Billy's greenkeeping education began almost as soon as he could walk.

"Since I was knee high to a Dunlop 65," he says, using the wit and turn of phrase that seminar delegates the world over have enjoyed through the years.

"At Cardross Golf Club, near Glasgow, my brothers and I would be out divotting, or, following the boys who were hand cutting greens, switching and clearing up. The great thrill was when we were allowed to wash their machines and then drive them back into the shed – we were so small the handles were above our heads. It was a passion even then," he said, talking of innocent times denied youngsters today because of much tighter Health and Safety legislation.

Currently the oldest in the family, Stewart, is Course Manager at Mill Ride; Bobby is at Hendon; Ian, a former winner of the Toro Award for Excellence in Greenkeeping, is three miles from Billy at Walton Heath, and Cameron is at Queenwood. Sister, Heather, is not a greenkeeper but is an equally important member of the dynasty.

Funnily enough Jack implored his boys not to become greenkeepers because of the poor money and poor working conditions. Initially Billy took him at his word.

"When I left school at 16 I was going to be a plumber in Dumbarton but my dad came to see us when we were at cadet camp and told us were moving to England. I was full of doom and gloom and said I was going to be a plumber, but he said he'd got me a job with him as a greenkeeper. So much for his earlier advice!"

Billy and his twin brother, Bobby, joined Jack at Bushill Park Golf Club in North London as Apprentice Greenkeepers.

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Tyrrell's Wood Team

"I remember dad putting his arm round Bob and me on our first day and saying we must never sacrifice quality for quantity – we must always do a quality job... but if we weren't back by 8 o'clock he'd kick our backsides. So he not only insisted on quality but indoctrinated us with productivity as well."

Billy stayed at Bushill Park until he was 17 and a half when he got his first Head Greenkeeper's job. He had to fib at the interview to get it, saying he was 18.

"It was a nine hole course near Reading, then called the Black Swan Golf Club, now it's Hurst GC, and I had a husband and wife team working with me. They were from a farming background and were great. They didn't know much about greenkeeping but they taught be a lot about driving tractors and tying knots. They were good times."

From there he moved to Cray Valley, in Kent.

"It was a very commercial operation and we built an extra nine holes while I was there and learned a lot about driving lorries and 360 diggers. I also met my wife while I was there."

From Kent he was tempted by the opportunity of working at Badgemore Park, at Henley-on-Thames.

"I've never been reluctant to move for work. Greenkeepers are slightly nomadic, Scottish greenkeepers particularly so, and it lets you experience life and different conditions. No two golf courses are the same and I've been fortunate to work on London clays, heathland, chalk downland and it all helps make you a better greenkeeper.

After the spell at Badgemore Billy was asked by his dad to join him at Sunningdale in the run up to the 1987 Walker Cup match.

"I became Old Course Foreman and it was a very special time for me at Sunningdale. You couldn't buy that sort of experience and preparing the course for the Walker Cup was wonderful.

"The club's resolve was without compromise, and when it came to greenkeeping, organisational skills and dedication my dad was leading edge. I don't think we'll ever get him to retire but we're hopeful of getting him to slow down to six days a week."

From Sunningdale, Billy moved to Effingham Golf Club, a mere four miles from Tyrrell's Wood, and a fine chalk downland course. He remained there until he was drawn to the newly built Wildwood Country Club in 1992.

"Wildwood was a real reality check on life for me as we had to secure membership from zero in a very tough market place so the product had to be perfect. It was a tough school."

The club ran into financial difficulties and was sold to a Japanese company and Billy's job was extended to become Group Course Manager, overseeing final construction of Lamerwood Country Club, in Hertfordshire.

"I did this for six months when they said they asked me to become General Manager. I thought they meant of Wildwood Country Club but they meant Group General Manager. Another enormous challenge," said Billy.

"The Managing Director was Mr Takabatake, but we all shortened that to Mr T. He enjoyed that and we found it easier to spell. He was, and still is, very kind to me and told me I could have all the assistance I needed to do the job. He also told me, and this is a great lesson in instilling confidence in people, that I would never make the wrong decision - which meant he would back me 100% - but that we might discuss things from time to time should I get it wrong."

Billy had responsibility for all aspects of the clubs from the golf operation through to the golf course but always ensured that he had an active role on the greenkeeping side of the operation.

"It was an enormous job – For four years I was driving thousands of miles a year and I probably wasn't home enough. That's probably why I'm



divorced now, my work/life balance was wrong."

The catalyst for change came when Wildwood was sold leaving Billy facing a 75 mile journey each day to his place of work so he moved to Mannings Heath Golf Club until his current role at Tyrrells Wood, which he took on three years ago.

"I really do feel blessed. I don't think I've ever worked for a nicer, warmer and friendlier membership and I feel I've got the balance between my work and home commitments about right."

In three years on the golf course the team has remodelled huge parts of the golf course and they have increased the machinery base to become an impressive fleet of machinery while they have also invested in new irrigation.

"It has all been a huge commitment for this members' club."

Billy is a self-confessed people person and is thoroughly looking forward to the opportunity to meet many more people than would be the case in normal circumstances.

"I want to open my ears and listen to the problems that people are experiencing and share the burden with them. That's the great thing about

BIGGA, people can share difficulties and problems and seek advice and help. It is such a generous industry, I've never been charged for good advice in my life. At Harrogate you talk with greenkeepers to three or four o'clock in the morning, get up at six and do it all again.

"I'll do the best I can to represent BIGGA in all regards. I'm sure there will be issues for the Association to involve ourselves with over the next 12 months which will be emotive, tough, exciting and rewarding. We have to continue to progress the Association to secure its future because if we don't we do everything that has gone on before a disservice. Nothing stands still so we must continue to develop and I'm sure we will have to work closely with all the staff at BIGGA HOUSE to that end."

Billy has six children to keep him on the straight and narrow – Laura (23), whose son and daughter make Billy a grandfather; Lewis (21); Amy (19); Billy (14); Shannon (13) and Summer (9).

If he has one piece of advice for all greenkeepers up and down the country it is.

"Remember to go home. Your family do need to see you sometimes too."