



Photograph by Mike Beardall



# EUROPEAN TOUR



*The European Tour has been a BIGGA Golden Key supporter since 1997 and since then through the Main Tour, the Challenge Tour and the Seniors' has visited over 1000 golf courses. Scott MacCallum met with David Garland to talk about the issues of the day.*

**It's not often you could look back at a European golf season, during which a Ryder Cup was lost, and still see it as a good year. But that's exactly how 2008 should be written up in the history books.**

Sure, Nick Faldo's team lost out in Valhalla, but it came at the end of an unprecedented run of European success in the Ryder Cup and, much as it did with the European revival in the 80s, an American win should do much to reinvigorate the event.

But Pádraig Harrington's emergence as a true Champion in Majors with back-to-back wins in The Open and USPGA Championships marked the year out as something special.

It's easy to forget that Harrington teed off at Royal Birkdale not knowing if his injured wrist would carry him more than a few holes and to win in such majestic style, overhauling the amazing Greg Norman, was a wonderful achievement. Then to stare down Sergio Garcia over the back nine of the USPGA Championship to become the first European winner of the modern age took Harrington to another level.

On the European Tour itself, 2008 saw one of the most remarkable chapters in its history with the signing of the agreement with Leisurcorp – new owners of Turnberry – for the Race to

Dubai, which will culminate in the top 60 players on the Money List competing for a \$10 million purse and \$10 million bonus pool in the Dubai World Championship. Makes your eyes water a little doesn't it?

"It is exciting. But it has always been exciting to work here," said David Garland, the Director of Tour Operations, as we sat in his office in the Wentworth-based Tour Headquarters.

"The awards for the players at the top end are fantastic and it's a wonderful contract we have with Leisurcorp," said David, adding that the first of the World Championships will be played over the Earth Course at Jumeirah Golf Estates - a new Norman design.

The Race to Dubai has caused such a stir among the world's top players that many of them, including Camilo Villegas, Anthony Kim, Jeff Ogilvy and Mike Weir among others have joined the Tour, while other big names are considering joining them.

It marks an end to the traditional season finale when the Volvo Masters visited southern Spain, usually Valderrama, with weather often being a headache.

"We're an outdoor sport and weather is an issue. We've just played the Volvo Masters, for the 21st and last time at Valderrama, and we had very poor weather but the construction of

the course made it playable when all the other courses around were closed. That is testimony to what a wonderful venue it has been for us over the years," said David.

The 1997 Ryder Cup at Valderrama was another example of when poor weather nearly disrupted the event and it was only thanks to the wonderful construction and great work by owner Jimmy Patino and his team that allowed Seve Ballesteros to lead his team to a famous victory.

For many years the Sotogrande-based course has been the benchmark for conditioning on the European Tour and David believes that the quality of Valderrama quickened the rate of improvement in the condition of other Tour venues.

David joined the Tour in 1988 and has witnessed first hand the strides that have been made since then.

"That was the first year of the Volvo Masters and Valderrama was by far the best conditioned course in Europe and it has pulled the rest of the courses up to the standards they are now. That gap has now closed and other tournament venues are similar to the quality that Valderrama produces. All are of a high standard now but then generally the standard of regular golf clubs has risen enormously over the past 20 years," he said.

"At the end of the day it is still about golf tournaments but the biggest advances have been

in players services as well as the extent to which a European Tour event is marketed by the tourist authorities in the region or country. They are not stand alone golf tournaments anymore but part of a much bigger picture."

David is well aware of the fact that the Tour causes expectation levels to rise among golf club members and he sympathises with the pressure that results from that.

"People are expecting fast greens all the time and this can't happen. Those clubs who try to achieve tournament speeds all year round can have it backfire and stress out their greens," said David.

"The biggest thing we strive for is not speed but consistency."

With Tour players and officials having their passports stamped in countries their predecessors had only ever read about in books, it means a huge range of golf course and maintenance regimes.

They play on true links like St Andrews, without much rough; tree lined courses like Wentworth; modern courses like the K Club, while they are now in Asia and South Africa where the grasses are different.

"We have been very pleasantly surprised by China because the golf courses we play there are all modern and built to a high specification and they have experienced Course Managers, usually American, European or Australian."

The Tour has six greenkeepers/agronomists who provide support to the venues.

"Richard Stillwell runs the department, while we still use Jack McMillan as well as some very good guys in Eddie Adams, Graham McNiven, Alan Purdie and Scott McLean. There are five Scots in there just to keep Richard on his toes," laughed fellow Scot, David.

Every course gets at least one visit but more are made if considered necessary, while, on occasion, someone can be put into a venue for a few weeks in advance and during the tournament itself to offer advice and support.

"Really, we're there to advise, our team are experts in Tournament preparation and for the 'final tweaking' – the putting on of the lipstick if you like. The event is on television and we want to show the golf course off to its best. It's cutting lines to television cameras, raking bunkers towards the direction of play so we don't get ridges behind the ball."

(The support that comes from the Tour Greenkeeping Department can also help with the amount of cutting that goes on during an event.)

"Generally speaking we have 156 players in the field on a weekly basis and wherever possible we have a two tee start – that gets more people on the golf courses at the same time and makes it a slightly shorter day than a one tee start – but it does put pressure on the greenkeeping team to have the course prepared in time.

"We also get support from Toro who bring in a tournament fleet if extra machines are required."

With the three main Tours – the Challenge, the European Tour and the Seniors' Tour – the European Tour goes to over 100 venues each year and in his 20 years on Tour David has some good news for all Tour, or potential Tour, venues.

"I've never known a situation where greens have died off a short time after the Tour has visited. It's an Old Wives' Tale that we'd have crazy procedures and practices that affect the long term health of the greens. That is certainly not true. It's basic, commonsense greenkeeping

that we advocate. It's aeration, aeration and more aeration."

The Tour has been a Golden Key of BIGGA since 1997 and David is delighted to be able to provide educational support to the Association's members.

"We have a good relationship with BIGGA and would like that to be as strong as possible. We are particularly close to some of the Course Managers, including current BIGGA Chairman Kenny Mackay, since his time at Hanbury Manor, and incoming Chairman, Peter Todd."

David is also a regular visitor at Harrogate Week.

"I really enjoy going to Harrogate for a couple of days. It really is a wonderful meeting place and I can catch up with a number of people at the same time."

The Tour has grown amazingly over the last two decades. It has produced a string of golfing superstars and showcased some of the finest established and new courses in the UK, mainland Europe and beyond.

"We are here for the long term and we can all learn from each other."

As we reached the tail end of the interview, I still had a bone to pick with David. It was a personal beef regarding something the Tour has done absolutely nothing to halt and which has merely reinforced one of the negative images golf has among non-golfers – fashion!

Why is it, I asked, that we are seeing so many gaudy trousers, garish shirts and white belts on Tour?

"Scott, perhaps you're just middle aged!"

After an enjoyable interview it was, I think you'll agree, a very low blow to a legitimate question.



BMW PGA Championship Support Team 2007, The Wentworth Club