

# A rising star

Castle Stuart has been open less than two years but, as Scott MacCallum found out, you wouldn't know it, and next month it is hosting the Barclay's Scottish Open



**Looking out of one of the many huge windows in the superb Art Deco clubhouse at the magnificent Castle Stuart links it is easy to visualise Harry Vardon striding majestically down the 9th fairway in his Plus 4s; Tom Watson drilling a 2-iron into the 18th green, or Seve taking the acclaim, having got up and down from an impossible spot on the 3rd to save par.**

In fact, it wouldn't be too difficult visualising any one of the golfing greats pitting his wits against a course which looks like it has been around for a 100 years plus. But the fact is that so far none of them have, as the course, close to Inverness in the Highlands of Scotland, with the stunning Moray Firth as a backdrop, is virtually brand new.

Moreover, when it hosts the Barclay's Scottish Open next month it will have been open for business less than two years.

Indeed, a mere four years ago much of Castle Stuart consisted of potato and carrot fields, but it is a tribute to the work that has been

done in the building, growing-in and establishment of the course that a flagship European Tour event like the Barclay's Scottish Open could even be considered a possibility.

The inspiration behind Castle Stuart is American developer, Mark Parsinen, who had originally been one of the investors and founders of Kingsbarns.

In 2001 Mark decided he wanted to create a golf course of his own and began an extensive search of Scotland to find suitable land.

It was when he was looking at a stretch of Highland real estate that he happened to glance over and spot a bank of gorse on land which offered the elevation that drew comparisons with the fabled Royal Dornoch links not too far away. His search was over.

Mark then persuaded Stuart McColm, Course Manager at Kingsbarns, to become Project Manager for the new course with the promise of the position of General Manager once the course was up and running.







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One of Stuart’s first appointments was Chris Haspell, who was drawn away from an excellent job in Denmark to become Course Manager.

Together with American architect, Gil Hanse, the newly-created Project Management team set about creating a golf course which will undoubtedly become one of the finest to be found anywhere.

“I was actually at Askernish doing some volunteer work with Gordon Irvine, when I saw a news report on the television that planning approval had been granted for the new Castle Stuart course and I actually wrote a letter of application there and then from the hotel,” recalled Chris, who had no idea at that stage that Stuart, who he’d met on a number of occasions, was involved in the project.

“Stuart called me and we met on site in May, 2006 and the site really did sell itself. He phoned me later to offer me the job, the stipulation being that I start within a month. I was very grateful to my old boss for his understanding in letting me go on the proviso that I return three times the first year and twice the second to advise on my old course.”

The work of turning agricultural fields into world class golf course began in earnest on June 26, 2006, with the earth moving to create a rough outline of the holes. The entire first year was spent shaping.

“Just over half the site was on pure sand and we began to sand cap the rest of the site, to a depth of 40cm, with sand quarried from elsewhere on the site.

“I would say that it began to look like a golf course in May or June

2007,” said Chris, who managed a construction team of 10.

“We were working to a schedule of a hole a week – which involved sandcapping, installing irrigation, seeding and final prep and we finished in November of ‘07.”

Nothing was left to chance and quality was the watchword with the work carried out with Mark Parsinen on site permanently to ensure that his vision came to fruition.

An example of the attention to detail shown came on the 13th, a dogleg par-4, which boasts a wonderful view of the Kessock Bridge over the Moray Firth.

“Mark was adamant that when you play the course you should have it to yourself and that there should be seclusion on every hole. On the 13th he wanted to be able to



see a slither of water below the Keswick Bridge from the fairway. We had already landscaped the entire area when Mark spotted the top of a greenkeeper's head, who was stone picking on the 15th fairway, which runs behind the green.

He asked me how tall the guy was and I told him that he was six feet two. As a result we put a halt to seeding and lifted the fairway another six inches from 70 metres out so you couldn't see anyone behind the green."

The course takes full advantage of its surroundings. There are infinity edged greens and fairways making it look like the course runs into thin air or the water and which messes with depth perception, while the views of Fort George, Ben Nevis, Castle Stuart itself and the aforementioned Keswick Bridge

make the heart leap on the dullest of days.

Around the clubhouse and car park areas the upright sleepers give another feeling of establishment and quality.

The course has been seeded throughout with fescue which was a decision taken before Chris, a long time advocate of fescue from his time in Denmark, had come on board but for whom it was a huge attraction.

"We had a vision of trying to be as good as we could be agronomically and by having a pure sand type rather than a sand/soil mix has given us the opportunity to do that," explained Chris, who also said that the wonderful gorse which had created such a good impression on Mark, has been added to over the rest of the course with gorse

grown from seed. That also looks as though it has been there for years.

"If we'd used any other type of grass with the pure sand I believe we would have had serious issues. We have issues now, fescue isn't perfect, but the problems with maintenance would have been more serious had we gone down another route," he said.

"What will intrigue me when we have the tournament is what the player perception will be to playing on pure fescue, because nowhere else does it and it will look different to what they've seen before.

"We will try and keep the seed bank as fescue – don't get me wrong there is poa in there, but we'll try keep the fescue in the high 90%."

Chris says that they probably won't cut below five mil for the tournament.







BELOW: The team, including dogs Max and Chance, are Ewen, Ray, Roy, Andrew, James H, James T, Darren H, Darren S, Alan, David, Kevin, Graham, Chris, John and Neil

**“My team are a great mix of guys, most are local and four of them started here as young guys and came through apprenticeships. They’re all buzzing at the thought of the tournament coming to us”**  
Chris Haspell, Course Manager

“The Tour wants us to be stimping at nine the Friday before we start but the problem with fescue is that once you have the speed you can’t take it off because it doesn’t grow,” said Chris, who admits, particularly with the first of the three contracted Opens, that he will be pleased when it is over and the week has been a success.

He has faced questions and some criticism for the fescue approach but is confident that as well as fitting the R&A’s bill for sustain-

ability it provides an ideal playing surface.

“People have said that by going pure fescue we are creating a monoculture but it’s not because there are so many different fescues. We have a trial plot with 40 different fescues and we are testing to see which get disease and which don’t, what the colour is like in summer, how they cope with drought.”

As a result of the work that has been done, the new environment has attracted a huge range of wildlife.

“We’ve turned 90 hectares of farmland into a nature reserve. We’ve got Plovers, Oyster Catchers, Ospreys, Woodcocks, Kestrels, Little Owls, Long Eared Owls wading birds, Sea Eagles, while we’ve got 62 nesting pairs of Sandmartins in the quarry we’ve created.”

A European Tour event was never a consideration until Stuart and Chris met with representatives from the European Tour early last year at a Challenge Tour event at Spey Valley and invited them across to Castle Stuart for a game.

With the contract with Loch Lomond coming to an end and the Tour wishing to return the Scottish Open to a links course to attract a top field with relevant practice for The Open Championship, which traditionally follows the tournament, everything fell into place.

Barclay’s visited, had a look and were happy with what they were shown and the agreement with the Tour was signed in the second week in January.

Castle Stuart may well be the youngest course ever to be given such a flagship event on the European Tour and the Barclay’s Scottish Open will be the biggest sporting event that the Scottish Highlands has ever had.

“There has been great support from the Golf Tourism Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the local council which has been great.

“There will be concerts running in Inverness all week and a huge buzz has been created behind the scenes.”

The development of Castle Stuart has been carried out with a view of producing a quiet efficiency in all areas.

The maintenance team currently consists of eight, plus Chris, plus seasonal support and a divoting team, not excessive given the high standard of presentation required.

“I’m delighted with my team you are nothing without them. Most of them are local and four of them started here as young guys and came through apprenticeships.

“They are a great mix of guys and they are all buzzing at the thought of the tournament coming to us,” said Chris.

Castle Stuart may be a youngster, but it will not be long before it is considered an equal alongside the very best courses around.

With the arrival of the Scottish Open, it’s own history of memorable deeds, performed by the modern superstars of the game, can then start to be catalogued.





## Stuart: enjoying his new role



Stuart McCole is loving the challenge that his new role is giving him.

“It came about by accident. I lived and breathed Kingsbarns from the grow-in stage, and was really enjoying being back as part of the St Andrews family and working with Walter (Woods) again.

“Mark (Parsinen) then asked me to take a look at this new site and as I had lived in Inverness I asked him where it was. I couldn’t picture it so I travelled up and took a look and found it as stunning as he did. However, when he asked if I would join him I said that it would be hard for me to give up a Top 50 course in the world to do another project which would take years of my life and potentially ended up with me in the same position as I already had – Course Manager at a Top 50 course There was no incentive for me.

“Mark then said that he’d like me to come up and project manage before taking on the role of General Manager because it was his belief that the General Manager should have his finger on the pulse of the product and that I would be able to do that – not that every Course Manager would want to do it,” recalled Stuart.

“I do have an interest in wine on a personal basis but I wouldn’t say that food and wine excited me, while I’d never been in the hospitality game. However, I could put a budget together, look at sales forecasts, that sort of thing. So I felt that General Manager could be a natural progression for me.

“I’ve not been in it long enough to be judged a success and if I stopped enjoying it, who knows what I would do, but at the moment I’m really enjoying the challenge,” he said.

“It’s a steep learning curve, but I’ve always believed that a desire and passion to get the job done is more important than the skill set which is needed for the job as you can always learn that and you find a way of getting it done. That’s what I believe – if you are given an opportunity you turn it down at your peril.

“How are you going to get on in life if you don’t take your opportunities?”

Stuart has had input in all aspects of Castle Stuart including the design of the clubhouse.

“I’ve always thought it strange that locker rooms tend to be in the cellar or back of the club with no windows. Coming here you can see the golf course, and all the wonderful views, when you are eating in the bar, from the locker rooms, even when you are taking a shower. It all adds to the experience.”

Stuart and Chris work very closely together but Stuart tries to look at the course from a golfer’s perspective now.

“It’s not my own personal turf anymore and I’ve had to pull away from it because it’s not my bag any more, but I do know what it takes to get a product like this up and running although it doesn’t mean that I can’t question Chris or say no to one of his many requests.”

With the Barclay’s Scottish Open set for the next three years, a five star hotel, a golfers’ lodge, and a series of time share developments, not to mention another 18 holes all in the pipeline it is fair to say that Stuart will be kept busy for some time to come.