

Continental shift

Mark Alexander finds out how an Irish greenkeeper ended up at a Dutch course run by a group of Scottish golf pros





Driving across Holland, you don't get the sense that this is a golfing nation. As you would imagine, the place is falling down with windmills, canals and tulips, but flagsticks are conspicuous by their absence. It's a strange omission considering the country claims it can trace its golfing heritage back to the very origins of the sport.

In fact, the relentless flat plains of this low-lying country provide no hint of the fervour with which the Dutch have rediscovered the game in recent years. According to KPMG's 2010 Country Snapshot, there are more than 360,000 golfers in the Netherlands with 12 times more people playing the sport now than 20 years ago. This impressive rate of growth (10% per annum) has outpaced the growth in supply (5%) which has produced 192 courses.

With this fevered backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that Holland recently put together a bid to host the 2018 Ryder Cup. And it wasn't just any bid. Of the five countries to make it to the final selection stages of the bidding process, only two presented their case based on the merits of existing courses. The French bid was one - the Dutch was the other.

Opened by Ryder Cup captain Colin Montgomerie in May, the Dutch - as it has been officially named - is for all intents and purposes a rough-and-ready links-style course.

"Radical shaping has been used to create a rugged golf-course character where undulating fairways, featuring many bumps and hollows, are framed by dramatic mounding," explains a note on Montgomerie's website, who lent his signature to the course.

In between the bumps and hollows, the course stays true to its origins by incorporating a host of water features which are an inevitable byproduct of building a course on land below sea level. The transformation, masterminded by European Golf Design (EGD), has been absolute with straight and angular canals magically remoulded into meandering streams and sweeping lakes.

The man in charge of the grow-in and ongoing maintenance of the course, which was opened shortly before the Ryder Cup announcement in May, is Niall Richardson. Talented, focussed and possessing a wicked sense of humour, Niall arrived in Holland three years ago following a challenging stint at Moyvalley Golf, Hotel and Country

House in his native Ireland. "I was banging my head against a brick wall trying to produce the highest possible standards," he admits.

The EGD-designed Darren Clarke-signature course was the third high-profile build he had been involved in. His first had created one of Ireland's most acclaimed resorts - Carlton House. "That was a special place," he recalls.

"The owners were custodians of a 13th century estate and developed two fabulous golf courses. They had real passion and drive."

The 36-hole complex featured Mark O'Meara and Colin Montgomerie-signature courses and established a clear pattern that Niall has followed ever since. Typically involving big-name players and the input of EGD, Niall naturally gravitated towards new developments and the lure of the grown-in.

"This is my fourth grow-in. I must be a gluten for punishment or something," he jokes.

"I love it - the excitement and the buzz of creating something new. The enthusiasm of everyone involved is infectious."

He certainly caught the bug when he met the team behind The Dutch, who collectively operate a networking company based around organised golf days. Devised and operated by golf pros, many of whom originate from Scotland; Made in Scotland was formed a decade ago with the idea of taking corporate clients to play some of the world's most iconic courses. The team cornered the Dutch corporate market, but their success was dependant almost entirely on access to and the service of their hosts.

An idea was duly hatched to form a golf club especially for Made in Scotland and its clients, and Niall was drafted in as the man on the ground.

"I arrived on a very dull, misty April day and met about 11 of the guys, who were all high-fiving each other and chatting away," he recalls.

"I remember thinking these are the kind of people I want to work with. And then I went to the site. It was just farmland; terrible, wide-flat open farmland. I thought they were having a laugh."

They weren't. The soggy terrain was to provide the foundations for a championship course, and Niall was the man to make it happen.

The featureless and sodden ground would be a problem, but looking closer at the project, Niall found there were more issues below the surface.



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Niall Richardson

ABOVE: Niall Richardson, Course Manager (right) with the course's Architect, Ross McMurray (left)

"When I looked at the tender, I saw there was no reference to a stone burier, and asked who was going to bury the stones. They didn't know what I was talking about," he says.

"There are no such things as stones over here. The only stones on this site are the ones in the rubble mixed in with the filling ground. It's sand, silt and organic material deposited over a hundred years; that's what they have here."

In terms of construction, the saturated ground would clearly be an issue, especially in terms of settlement and especially around the greens.

"When you're building a USGA-spec green, the sub-base must be identical to the gravel layer which must be identical to the root zone so that everything forms properly. You have to have a stable foundation," Niall explains.

"Our Project Manager, Hubert Lendering who is an industrial engineer, suggested we use floating foam concrete which is used over here to support roads and underground car parks. It would act as a low-weight sub foundation to go under the greens."

The idea was to create three layers of concrete built-up in a pyramid shape beneath the greens. Each covering would be about 30cms deep with the first outer layer spread out to around 1,200m², the second to about 1,000m² and the last to about 800m².

"The foam concrete guarantees there is a stable plateau under



each green so there is no sinkage or settlement,” Niall explains.

Although the idea was simple, it had to overcome serious ground issues that could literally undermine the course.

With the potential for unstable greens, the completed putting surfaces are surprisingly fast and pleasingly firm. More importantly, they run true.

Equally as impressive is their health which can be attributed to the considered approach adopted by Niall.

“I am always concerned by how the staff treat the greens,” he admits.

“For me, the most important priority is the greens. We treat each one as an alter and refer to them as our babies. It’s the old policy; start at the pin and work out.”

Although golf in Holland can be traced back over many centuries, the expertise needed to maintain championship-standard courses is typically thin on the ground. As a result, Niall’s emphasis on green care had to be introduced to a new breed of Dutch greenkeepers.

“I try to instill in my guys respect for the greens,” he says.

“But in order to do this project, we couldn’t always get fully qualified greenkeepers - three of my guys

had never set foot on a golf course before they started here.”

The Irishman’s approach wasn’t all about teaching respect and parenting skills however; he also introduced some practical steps to safeguard his cherished offspring.

“We fenced each green,” he recalls.

“The Made in Scotland boys asked if the fences were to protect the greens from the animals, and I said ‘yes, especially the two-legged animals who like to bring clients out here’. I wanted to keep everyone off the greens.”

Of course, during a new construction soil can be often brought in from any number of sources with each consignment potentially transporting weeds, disease and unwanted grasses. In order to protect the 100% creeping bentgrass surface, Niall introduced a forensic approach more akin to television programmes like CSI.

“We introduced a policy of tennis-shoes only on the greens,” he says.

“The idea was to take the machine up to the edge of the green, make sure it was clean, put the machine onto boards, change our shoes and get on with the job.

“That’s for disease management so you’re not bringing something from outside, in. It’s also for cross-

contamination and it protects the greens from workmen’s boots which aren’t the most delicate things. I don’t want that kind of footwear going across my babies.”

Caught short, the greenkeepers at The Dutch have even been known to go about their work shoeless.

“A lot of the lads will take their steel toe-capped boots off and walk onto green surface in their socks. There’s probably a health and safety code against that, but I don’t argue with them.”

The staff of 10 full-time greenkeepers not only tip-toe across the greens, they also hand-mow and hand-spray them, as well as hand-mowing the surrounds and tees, and hand-raking the bunkers.

The finish is spectacular and has worked a treat in attracting and retaining members. Indeed, despite a lavish joining fee of €43,500 and hefty annual subscriptions of €2,500, the number of members at The Dutch has swelled to over 750.

Bearing in mind, 150 of these are corporate members who pay anything up to €250,000 a year, it’s clear the greenkeeping staff are doing something right.

Indeed, with a second course in the offing and a boutique hotel planned, the future looks bright for The Dutch.