

# If the shoe fits...



Next year at Vale of Llangollen Golf Club, Jez Hughes (left) will be Course Manager when wearing his boots, and Club Captain when he dons his shoes. As Scott MacCallum found out, it's a quick change act he is looking forward to making







**Last year saw Sir Alex Ferguson acclaimed for his 25 years in charge of Manchester United. He received praise from all quarters for the many trophies he had won during his two and a half decades, and the North Stand at Old Trafford was renamed in his honour.**

What it demonstrated, and what many rival clubs failed to put into practice, was the benefits of continuity and consistency. Swapping managers can sometimes bring a short term boost, but rarely long term success.

Jeremy Hughes – universally known as Jez – is celebrating 25 years at Vale of Llangollen Golf Club, in North Wales, 17 of them as Course Manager.

Just like Man United, the course has benefited from the continuity of management, and while Jez hasn't yet had any part of the club named after him, he is being honoured – as next year's Club Captain!

"I'd been a member here since I was 11 but I can remember the first job I had when I came in for three weeks work in November, 1986. It was mixing top dressing so I was putting sand and soil through a riddler.

As it turned out it wasn't good enough, so in the end it was used to help build the 18th tee," recalled Jez, a BIGGA member since 1990.

It was when he was asked to cut some fairways that his potential shone through and Jez began to see a career stretching out in front of him.

"I'd never considered becoming a greenkeeper. I genuinely believed that I would work with my dad in the family timber business alongside my brothers," said Jez, of his father's company which exported wood veneers to Germany and Austria.

"We used to spend a lot of time in Scotland. We spent a lot of time in Kirkcaldy and I learned to play golf in Fife, on courses like Lundin and Leven Links and Elie."

He was given his first full time contract in April 1987, successfully completing a trial to become Deputy Head in 1990 and doing the same prior to being confirmed as Course Manager in 1995.

"I was the only golfer on the team and I think it meant that I looked at things slightly differently. I was interested in how things could be shaped and cut while I was also hot on attention to detail which has now become common practice throughout the greenkeeping team," he explained, as we sat in



**"If I've got my boots on, I'm Course Manager; if I've got my shoes on, I'm Captain. But if I've got my golf shoes on, I'm a golfer, so leave me alone!"**



the attractive clubhouse which looks over the course.

Since then Jez and his team have worked tirelessly to raise the bar at Vale of Llangollen to the extent that the course is regarded as one of the finest in North Wales.

"We were the first club in the area to install an on-line booking and automated response system which enables us to build a database and receive feedback on the experience people had when they visited the club," explained Club Manager, Bob Hardy.

"Without exception they come back saying that the course was fantastic, the greens were the best they'd played on all year and that they want to come back," said Bob.

"We used to send the reports down to him, but that was before his head became too big," he joked.





“Seriously, though, it’s good motivation for the team. It’s nice to know that what you are doing is being appreciated.

“We’re all proud of Jez here for the work he’s done and the fact that he is a Director of BIGGA,” said Bob.

With approximately 55,000 rounds a year, keeping the course at its best is a task which keep the five strong greenkeeping team busy.

“Over the years, in addition to ensuring that the greens keep to a high standard, an extensive tree management programme has been on-going as well as a bunker refurbishment programme and a tee refurbishment programme”

When he took over there was some thatch issues and Jez began hollow coring twice a year and he topdressed with sand for the first five years.



“We then progressed with some gravel banding in 2000 and then the Shelton 25 system in 2010 on 13 greens to aid the drainage. With the change now in maintenance procedures we have used the Graden sand injection twice in the last 3 years alongside our monthly aeration, top dressing and liquid foliar feed programme.”

The course, which as its name suggests is in a valley, boasting superb views of the hills and, not to mention, the spectacular River Dee running alongside four of the holes, had some dramatic changes 20 years ago.

“We received two tree grants in the early 90s which stipulated how many trees we had to plant, how close together they should be planted and the species we were required to plant – and not all of

them were types we wanted,” recalled Jez.

Since then they have thinned them out to create shape on the golf course as well as joining them up to define some of the holes.

“We have a lot of tree lined holes which does cause considerable maintenance issues with leaf collection, while during dry summers, like last year, they do draw moisture out of the ground.

“I’ve educated the membership now that trees are in essence a crop and that certain trees have certain lifespans.

“Also, that trees have to be removed for the benefit of the course to aid in sunlight and air flow to certain areas.” said Jez.

Two trees which do hold reserved status at the club appear on the 10th fairway. The oaks are the 4th





and 6th oldest in North Wales and the hole is known as "Twin Oaks".

The bunker work is continual particularly when the course falls victim to weekends like the one early last February.

"We were hit by a mini tornado on the Friday afternoon. It tore out the practice net and ripped off the roof of our Halfway House and dumped it 40 yards away narrowly missing one of our guys, and then on the following Sunday day the dam at the reservoir in Bala was opened to let some of the water out, but too much water was released and it flooded four of our holes – the 1st, 9th, 15th and 16th. It was three feet deep at its worst and lay for some 36 hours.

There was a lot of silt and debris on the greens tees and fairways but it completely washed the bunkers out on those holes," explained Jez, who said that it was something which had happened to a slightly lesser degree three times through the years 2000-2004.

Despite having been at the club for such a period motivation has never been a problem.

"As an active member of the golf club I wouldn't want to go out on a Saturday, play the course and have people complaining about the quality of the course. I like to do it right even if I know it's not going to be perfect all the time," said Jez, who has represented Denbighshire county and North Wales teams.

"I was also the Minorcan Amateur Champion in 2005 and my name is on the board at Son Parc golf club over there. I've never won the Club Championship here though," he said ruefully.

He is really looking forward to his year as Captain and has developed an interesting way of splitting his roles at the club.

"If I've got my boots on, I'm Course Manager; if I've got my shoes on, I'm Captain but if I've got my golf shoes on I'm a golfer so leave me alone I'm playing golf," he joked.

He is certainly not one who is going to add a Captain's Tree or a Captain's Bunker to the course.

"I've seen 25 different Captains many of whom have wanted a tree, bunker or a pond put on the course. After my year I'd just like everyone to say that I was a good Captain and that I did a good job," said Jez, who hopes that, at 42, he will be able to encourage a younger feel to the club.

Listening to both Jez and Bob you can't help but agree that the former's year in office will do nothing to damage their on-going working relationship.

"The Captain is just one of the Board here and not in charge of the club. He has a vote along with another six Board Members so invariably only good decisions, for the benefit of the whole club, will be passed," said Bob.

"The days of the Captain coming in and saying 'This is what I'm going to do in my year,' have well and truly gone," he added.

That might just have scuppered one of the current Vice Captain's goals.

"Next year's pay rise might not be as easy as I thought!" joked Jez.

"Seriously, I don't see it being a problem at all. If there are any conflicts of interest which I feel I'd better off not being involved with, as an employee, I'll step back. It wouldn't be worth me getting involved."

The banter between Jez and Bob illustrates just how strong their working relationship is.

"He also knows that the year after he's been Captain he'll be back to normal," quipped Bob, before adding a more serious note.

"Jez comes not only with the respect of being Captain but also with the respect of knowing more than anyone else about the course. He's the expert there."

Jez is looking forward to his "drive in" which will take place on the first Saturday of next January.

"I'll have mixed emotions. I'll be nervous as I'm not playing as much as I used to and I'll want to strike a good one but it'll be quite sentimental as my dad won't be there to see me drive in and he's the man who introduced me to the game."

He may not have part of the club named after him but the continuity and success that Jez has brought Vale of Llangollen Golf Club means just as much to the members as Sir Alex Ferguson means to the Manchester United fans.

That said Jez would like it to be known that despite the references to Man Utd in this article he is a life long Liverpool supporter!

