



PROFILE

Name: Gordon Kerr
Born: 17 July 1959
Handicap: Nine
Hobbies: Watching football,
playing golf
Favourite sports team:
Dunfermline Athletic FC

It's bonnie by the Clyde

How have Gordon Kerr and his team brought PGA EuroPro Tour events to a course which only opened less than three years ago? And what are the technical challenges associated with such a young course? Steve Castle travelled to Scotland to find out

The “opportunity of a lifetime” is what Course Manager Gordon Kerr calls Mar Hall. For those who have had the privilege to have set foot on the new £4million layout situated on the banks of the River Clyde beneath the striking silhouette of the Kilpatrick Hills, it's easy to see why.

In 2007 Gordon was approached to oversee the creation of an 18-hole golf course within the grounds of the five-star Mar Hall Resort.

With a provisional opening date of 2010 in mind, the challenge was on – and he accepted.

Gordon, who lives just four miles from the course and is an avid golfer himself, recalls:

“It was a dream to be involved in

constructing a course from scratch.”

Gordon and his five-strong team, who moved to Mar Hall from nearby Gleddoch House Hotel and Golf Club, immediately went to work on the plans devised by renowned architect Dave Thomas and his son, Paul, who he says he relished working closely with.

However, though Mar Hall represented a timely opportunity,

construction coincided with the onset of the economic recession. With funds limited, the Course Manager had to rely on ingenuity, local knowledge and, more than anything, the adaptability and effort of his team to deliver on the owner's chief objective - a course that would allow golf all year round.

Unperturbed, ground was broken and Gordon turned to tried and tested local contractors and asked colleagues to take on the roles of dumper truck-drivers and excavators. Together they moved an almighty 160,000 cubic meters of sub soil - mostly stony shingle - and were ready to start building proper.

"We do get a fair bit of rain, but 80 per cent of the course is built on the riverbank's shingle ground. It was a good starting point as far as drainage is concerned.

"We're not permitted to drain water straight into the Clyde so we created an irrigation reservoir and four wetlands as catchments areas. The water regained from the 11th, 12th and 13th holes ensures the course is self sufficient for irrigation water."

The sub-soil was redistributed by the Mar Hall team on their convoy of dumper trucks and then moulded by skilled shapers into greens, surrounds and bunker complexes. Ironically, it was those sand traps that would prove to be Gordon's next 'hazard'.

The original plan was to turf all the bunker faces and install pipe and gravel for drainage. He intended to embark on the painstaking and costly job until, at the last minute, he was introduced to two techniques he'd never seen before - hydroseeding and Aquadyne. They proved to be shrewd alternatives.

"Aquadyne is a sustainable drainage product that removes water as efficiently as pipe and gravel," he explains. "I was a bit sceptical at first but I spoke to a couple of greenkeep-

ers who reassured me it was the best long-term option."

The Aquadyne was soon inserted and connected to the existing fairway drainage during winter without damage to the shaping of the bunkers or what would be the fairways or green surrounds. This meant that all 54 bunkers could be shaped. They were then hydroseeded in just two days, saving a massive amount of manpower, machinery and materials.

"These techniques saved us both money and time without compromising the condition of the bunkers. Can you imagine how time-consuming and expensive turfing would have been in comparison? It also meant we completed all of the required work in just two days."


However, he says that ultimately it took the hard graft of his team to realise the full benefits of the switch to Aquadyne.

"In the winter our guys would dig trenches by hand and connect the Aquadyne to the fairway drainage we'd already put in. It means that you now hardly ever see a bunker with water in it. Both those techniques saved us a lot of money, as did using our own guys on occasions we could have used outside contractors."

With the drainage installed, Gordon turned to a contractor he knew he could trust to carry out the final shaping, Greentech of Stirling. Their experts delivered the finishing touches using vital root-zone prior to seeding. That left the Mar Hall greens staff with another steep learning curve - seeding the greens. He admits the seeding process was the most stressful stage of the whole construction.

"I'd never seeded greens before, and when I spoke to other greenkeepers they told me all sorts of horror stories about the seed blowing away or root-zone being washed out."





**“The greens are fescue bent,
and we’ve got dwarf ryegrass
on the tees and fairways to
make them hard-wearing”**

10th green courtesy of Mar Hall



As it turned out, it would take a huge effort from Kerr and his crew to see the project through. "I remember we had seeded the first nine greens, but the wind really got up one evening so I was here at 11pm watering the greens to try and stop the seed blowing away. I'm sure some guys who've done this sort of thing before don't think it's a big deal, but to me it was because I was doing it for the first time.

"By June 2009 the greens and tees were all seeded and grown in by ourselves.

The greens are fescue bent and we've got dwarf ryegrass on the tees and fairways to make them hard-wearing which seems to have worked very well."

This left just the fairways to be seeded, but as so often is the case in the West of Scotland, the weather intervened. With a short window between July and September of 2009 to get the seed down, Gordon said the task grew increasingly demanding with each passing day.

"From July onwards it never stopped raining and the pressure was on to get the seed down. Even on sunny days the ground conditions just weren't dry enough, and we didn't want to compromise on quality."

Luckily, with ten good days of

weather forecast around mid-September, and with the contractors on standby, it was suddenly all systems go. Fairways and rough were ploughed, harrowed, and stone buried before the seed could finally be drilled in. Though the elements had conspired against them, Kerr says the job was achieved with long hours, good weather and a few fish suppers along the way.

"We were working shifts between 6am and 9pm. Looking back it was an amazing feat."

Mar Hall opened in May 2010 and, since then, the 6,507-yard course has steadily been gaining popularity among a mixture of members, pay-and-play visitors and hotel guests.

"We now have over 100 members, but we need to ensure we accommodate everyone who wants to play here."

The first chance to show off his and his team's hard work to a wider audience came one week last August.

"We applied to hold the Mar Hall, com Scottish Classic PGA EuroPro Tour event because we wanted to put Mar Hall on the map, and we were confident it was up to the standard required," he says. "Everyone was very proud when we were awarded it. It was probably the best week of weather all year. It was brilliant.

ABOVE: PGA EuroPro Tour, Scottish Classic, courtesy of the PGA



MACHINERY LIST

6 x Toro GM 1000 Handmowers
Toro Reelmaster 3500D
Toro Sand Pro
Toro 3250 Greens Machine
Toro 3100 Reelmaster
Toro 5410 Fairway mower
Charterhouse D5800 Top Dresser
Kubota RTV 900 Utility Vehicle
Kubota 50 – 40 Tractor + Loader
Kubota 30 – 30 Kubota Tractor
Greens – Iron 3900
Hardi Sprayer

"Obviously the course is still young and you always want to improve, so I'm delighted to say the EuroPro will be returning this August. This time around we want it to be better still."

Reflecting on the experience as a whole, Gordon is delighted at the achievement of bringing a course to championship standards from a piece of paper.

"It's been a great adrenaline rush. At times, of course it was stressful but it's still been a dream for me to see a course through from an architect's drawings to a major televised tournament."

