

Playing a **dual** role

Huw Morgan is both Club and Course Manager at Ashburnham Golf Club in South Wales - Laurence Pithie met up with Huw to find out more about his dual role





I first met Huw in 1988 when he was named 'Young Groundsman of the Year'. At the time he was an aspiring Head Greenkeeper at Fairwood Park GC near Swansea before moving on to Southerndown.

From 1993, he spent 13 years at the Wildernesse course in Kent, gaining his HNC in 2001 and the Master Greenkeeper award a year later. In 2007 the opportunity to manage a top links course enticed Huw to Ashburnham as Course Manager.

His remit was to improve the condition of the course in time for the Home Internationals in 2010. He was assisted by a £120k investment in equipment, as well as an operational budget that would allow the level of expenditure to match increased expectations. Staff training was also a necessary requirement for the work that lay ahead.

The task involved a combination of turf improvement work, creating additional tees and renovating all 70 plus bunkers in under three years. All was going to plan when just prior to the tournament, the club found themselves without a Club Manager. Huw takes up the story. "Three secretary/managers departed in five years with the latter resigning just ten weeks before the Home Internationals.

"There wasn't enough time to recruit a replacement and we needed stability when expectations were high, so I offered to fill the position for six months initially. I realised I would be stepping outside my comfort zone."

Challenges

Huw continues: "By June 2010 when I started my dual role as both Course and Club Manager, the country and in particular this region of south west Wales was in full recession. However I could see the club's potential and I had a passion to make it work, and thought it was a natural progression after 25 years in managing turf. I was to oversee the management of the course and a temporary greenkeeper was hired for six months to make up the shortfall in course work.

"Finance, golf competitions and matches were managed by the club but I would be in charge of everything else. A steep learning curve followed to gain an understanding of tee booking and other computerised systems, as well as catering, while at the same time working with a new board of directors who had

limited understanding of the running of a golf club. The early days meant that the members were not happy to see me in the office, nor were my greens staff!

"I needed to be flexible, an effective communicator and have a thick skin - I also needed diplomacy to keep a cool head when faced with an irate member or customer! It wasn't long before I realised that I needed to organise each day better and avoid tackling too many jobs at once. It was better to complete a smaller number of tasks before moving on.

"I had to get a better grasp of computers and to work more closely with other staff, whether it was in the office, bar, restaurant or kitchen. What I brought to the club was passion, experience, understanding golfers' needs and having a methodical approach to solving problems. This is something which most Course Managers are good at and I had to put this to good use on many issues ranging from blocked toilet drains to failed irrigation pumps."

Decision Making

After Huw's successful six months as interim club manager - which included hosting two major events - the club were faced with a dilemma. As is sadly the case with many clubs, membership numbers had decreased resulting in a significant drop in revenue. Ashburnham had a significant number of retired members with just 8% of the membership female, and very few members under the age of 30.

It was also noted that there was a reduced interest in competitive golf with friendly golf gaining the upper hand.

Visitor numbers remained steady, but two more courses opened nearby which affected Ashburnham. The reality was stark - the club could not afford to hire both a course manager and a general manager. Therefore the club retained Huw in his dual role but agreed the temporary greenkeeping position would not be filled for the forthcoming season. This meant Huw continuing to be in charge of the course, bar, catering and the professional shop, while being responsible to a board of six elected directors.

Working Progress

Now after three years as club manager, work generally follows a tried and tested routine. He said: "My day starts en route to the club





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with a brief telephone conversation with the Head Greenkeeper Paul Hopkins, who has over 25 years of experience.

“We discuss work past and present having previously agreed a monthly plan. I generally tour the course every two weeks although I try to squeeze in the odd game of golf with a member or board director to measure course playability. This works well at Ashburnham since much of the work is routine.

“After checking any messages, the real work begins - dealing with any club issues, banking, tee sheet bookings...and much more! Key member concerns tend to be depth

of sand in the bunkers, length of rough, greens speed and the weather.

“It is also worth noting that since very few members have low handicaps, the course is set up more for their enjoyment as opposed to ‘tournament’ condition. However, Ashburnham is a true links course with an emphasis on firm, smooth turf that encourages the ‘running’ game.”

The Course: Past and Present

Huw continued: “When I first started in 2007, we ran the course with six staff including myself.



Now we're running with five, which includes an apprentice greenkeeper. We have reduced our operational costs by £10k without having any real negative impact on the course. A detailed review of all expenditure was carried out including wages, overtime and materials purchased and highlighted areas where justified savings could take place.

"All equipment is now owned outright after a five year lease deal ended in 2012. We are due to replace much of the fleet in 2015, giving the club two years free of any leasing costs.

"Since 2007, only two machines have been purchased but we have sufficient equipment to maintain an 18 hole links course.

"All main equipment servicing and repairs are carried out by an external contractor, but on-site which has proved to be more cost effective as opposed to being sent to a dealer.

"Our irrigation system consists of class 'C' PVC pipe in 6 metre lengths which is coming to the end of its useful life and will need to be replaced in the future.

"In terms of maintenance, it is true that I now have a different view being a club manager as to what and when key cultural practices take place.

"The main difference now is that there is no disturbance to the putting surfaces between early March and mid-October.

"We do not hollow core, only deep tine out of season and spike or sarel roll during the summer. Top dressing is limited to the older methods of heavier applications at either end of the season, followed by over-seeding with straight fescue.

"Mowing height remains at 3mm during the summer with regular 'ironing' of the greens. Nutrient input is very low and hasn't really changed in six years, using monthly applications of Farmura Porthcawl and Revolution wetting agent.

"Although this works well on the natural links course here at Ashburnham, it may not be as appropriate on shaded or 'heavier' inland courses."

Huw is confident these changes have had no negative effects on course performance. The work has been limited to 'off-season', and since his feeding program is minimal and typical of many links, he can make this change without negatively impacting the course.

Summary

Huw concluded: "Since becoming a club manager, my priorities are different. Being 'sustainable' is more about profit and loss and less about growing fescues and controlling organic matter content. When you are a club manager, you have a different perspective than when managing the golf course.

"It's all about impact on the business. For us that means minimal

disturbance to the playing surfaces during the main season.

"My main challenges are no longer chafer grubs and badger damage but membership numbers, revenue and cash flow."

Finally, I asked Huw about any advice he had to others who may wish to follow his lead.

"Being flexible, helpful in accommodating golfers' needs, looking forward not back, being open minded and enthusiastic are all attributes that spring to mind.

"Learn new skills by enrolling on business management courses. Both the GCMA and CMAE run management courses to help prepare for club management. If I can do it, anyone can."

about the author



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With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.

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