



From left: David Gibbons, Luke Pythion, Steve Yates, Craig Hartley, James Newbold, John Barsby, Neil Baker



Little first steps at Aston

Neil Baker was appointed Course Manager at Little Aston Golf Club in Birmingham earlier this year. Laurence Pithie met up with Neil to find out how he's made an impression in those vital early days in charge

Prior to taking over the reins at Little Aston in Birmingham, Neil's career began at Weston-Super-Mare in 1992 before he moved across the Severn for spells at Royal Porthcawl and then neighbouring Pyle & Kenfig as First Assistant and Deputy respectively.

A move to the South East followed in 2006 with seven years spent as Course Manager at Tandridge Golf Club; a gem of a Harry Colt designed course in rolling Surrey countryside.

Qualified to Level 3 in Sports Turf Management and being an A1 assessor, Neil is also keen to gain his Foundation Degree in Turfgrass Management followed by the BIGGA Master Greenkeeper Award he has just applied for.

MAKING THE MOVE

When I caught up with Neil I asked him about his move to Little Aston and what it entailed. He replied: "When changing jobs, it is not just about managing another golf course since there are usually other aspects to consider such as relocating my family. But this was the right decision as it was the next logical step in my career progression."

The course is recognised as being one of the best inland courses in the UK and is regularly listed in the top 100 courses in the GB&I rankings - a championship course set within a 176 acre environment of mature park and woodland. It has a tremendous history, having staged numerous tournaments, matches and competitions since its inception in 1908 and is currently staging Open qualifying for the next four years. So what were the key aspects for Neil in gaining this position?

"The club recognised the need to make a number of changes both on and off the course. They wanted to appoint a Course Manager who would take control, lead, be responsible and to work within the framework determined by the club.

"For my part, I needed to understand the club, their business and their objectives. Little Aston is no ordinary golf club. It is steeped in history, has a limited and exclusive membership, of which many are members of the R&A, including the Chairman of Green, Keith Andrews. Society and visitor play is minimal but there are a number of matches between former pupils from the top private schools in the UK. You never know who may be walking your fairways!



"Therefore, I needed to understand the way in which the club operates and to have a good feel for what the members want to see; their priority being good greens. When being interviewed for any position, it is important to do your homework and know the course and club where you hope to be employed. My role here includes being able to demonstrate my commitment to the club as well as my family, working the hours necessary to manage the course, but also to maintain a balance between the two."

INITIAL ASSESSMENT & NECESSARY CHANGES

Neil continued: "My first impression of the course was good but it was somewhat tired in places. A course policy document was in place but it was in need of updating. The club were working closely with the STRI as their course advisors but it is fair to say that many of the recommendations being made had not been carried out.

"Record keeping, staff training and safety management were all in need of bringing up to date. I needed to implement these measures and to manage the team here accordingly in order to get the best out of them and help improve the condition of the golf course.

"In order to gain the confidence of both my team and the club, I

needed some 'quick wins', while at the same time, developing and proposing a five year plan covering the greenkeeping structure and the strategic development of the course.

"This would include bunkering, woodland management and heather regeneration as well as the capital investment in equipment to achieve these objectives. Communication would be vital if I was to succeed and this would involve board and members' presentations when deemed appropriate, along with regular newsletter updates. Being able to respond to questions is part of a Course Manager's role, along with addressing members' wishes."

WORKING PROGRESS

As we toured the course, I asked Neil to detail the work completed and the practices now being implemented.

"The 'quick wins' were relatively straightforward, although as I started during 2013's bitterly cold spring these took longer to take effect. It was really a case of getting the basic agronomic practices in place along with improved course presentation. This required a greater level of intensity from tee divoting to greens aeration and from pedestrian mowing greens to rough management. To begin

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. Previously he spent 17 years managing multi-site golf operations in the UK. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.



with, some staff required extra hand cutting training and fine tuning to match the standards set, therefore there was an initial period of training and assessment; very necessary if the established goals were to be achieved. There were some interesting discussions along the way, but now we have a better trained and motivated team, which has now been increased in size to seven staff. I am fortunate to be able to delegate many tasks to my Deputy Course Manager David Gibbons.

“Greens were the first priority since some turf loss had occurred following previous Anthracnose Foliar Blight infection. Being shallow rooted, overall turf health had to improve, therefore aeration and top dressing intensified along with an improved nutrient program. This year, nearly 160 tons of top dressing will have been applied to the greens along with 140kg of Bent grass seed used for overseeding.

“This type of work is now being extended onto the front approaches to achieve similar results. The fairways were also lacking in vigour and growth and they too required

increased aeration and a general feed to improve sward density. This theme has continued, namely getting the basics in place and more attention being spent on turf health and playing surface performance.

“In terms of management changes, it was a case of getting to grips with implementing various working procedures such as work planning and labour scheduling, while focusing on improving staff training and general motivation.

“Carrying out individual appraisals and focusing on strengths and weaknesses, I was then able to identify what was required. This ranged from better clothing to time-keeping and turfgrass knowledge. It is all part of creating a better working environment where staff take pride and ownership.”

Another and perhaps unusual aspect at Little Aston is the 34 strong artisan section, whose ages range from 25 to 83. In return for free golf at certain times of the week, each person completes up to three hours per week which amounts to about 90 hours of additional work being achieved on the course. This mainly entails bunker raking and

BELOW: Large Colt bunker kept in good shape

edging, fairway divot filling and woodland management.

Neil added: “Part of my role is to improve the outcome of their valued work contribution and this meant implementing a number of changes. This proved to be a challenge since implementing change is not always easy. However, once the reasons were explained and examples of work practice demonstrated,



all was well and I value their effort and enthusiasm for making the course as good as possible.”

Apart from the general routine practices and improvements being made both on and off the course, Neil highlighted some other key aspects at Little Aston.

“The 100 or so bunkers are a major feature on this course which was designed by Harry Vardon. It was then remodelled by Harry Colt’s genius in 1916; this at a time when there were fewer trees and bunkers were hazards to be avoided. Through time, changes to club and ball technology and members’ expectations, many have lost shape. Plans are afoot to make the necessary changes. Another key aspect is heather regeneration which is the responsibility of my deputy. Fortunately David has been growing heather on site since 2009. The planting of numerous young heathers, plus on site heather stock grown from seed generously donated by Jon Wood at Enville Golf Club, have been used on many of the holes to date. This followed acidifying and other prep work to the soil as well as tree removal and again this forms part of the overall strategy.”

CONCLUSION

When I was on site with Neil, a young apprentice was being given a tour of the course by the Deputy before starting work the following week.

When he met up with Neil, his advice was short and to the point; “Don’t be late, work hard and enjoy what you are doing”. This approach is at the heart of his style of management.

When asked to sum up what advice Neil would give to other Course Managers who are about to start a new job his key tips were:

- Analyse your site
- Evaluate your team
- Produce and present a business plan
- Know what the members expect
- Walk before you run

He added: ‘It is all about managing the structure and any changes that are necessary and working to four key phases in your daily set up; namely to Plan, Organise, Lead & Control.’

Laurence is grateful to Neil Baker and Little Aston GC for their help and input in producing this article.



TOP: Young heather plantings on hole 12
 MIDDLE: Good example of managing the roughs
 INSET: Neil Baker