

# Onwards and upwards



Andy Pullen was recently promoted from Deputy to Course Manager. Laurence Pithie met Andy to find out more about his experience, the challenges that lie ahead at North Wilts Golf Club, and his advice for Deputies looking to make the next step





**Andy Pullen can probably be described as a mix of ‘old and new school’ in terms of greenkeeping and golf course management. Having spent years under the tutelage of established Course Managers at Worplesdon, Hoebriidge, and North Hants Golf Clubs, he developed many traditional skills as well as keeping up to date with products and techniques in an ever changing industry.**

A four-year spell in machinery sales followed - however, a strong desire to get back into turfgrass management led Andy to Ogbourne Downs Golf Club near Swindon as Deputy Course Manager. Two years later, his hunger to progress resulted in another move, this time to North Wilts as Deputy before he was appointed Course Manager in 2012.

**From Deputy to Course Manager**

Making this upward move can be a daunting challenge and it’s

encouraging to see that this subject is now widely covered at BTME each year, with seminars and workshops usually hosted by experienced Course Managers who can pass on their knowledge and management expertise to help others. I was interested to learn more about the thinking behind Andy’s appointment.

The 46-year-old explained: “Although I did not have the same academic qualifications as many younger and aspiring course deputies, I did have valuable experience, learning from past masters at established clubs in the south east as well as enrolling on short one day courses to focus on particular subjects.

This can be an effective way to learn more about a particular subject such as plant nutrition. My four years in sales also gave me the opportunity to hone my skills in budgeting, planning, organisation, ordering processes and VAT.

“When the opportunity arrived for the top position, it was essential that I understood the club’s objectives, their core customers and

**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.

Laurence is grateful to Andy Pullen and North Wilts GC for their help and input in producing this article.

what was expected of me by both the club and the greenkeeping team. If I was to step up to the mark, I needed to make an impression and above all be prepared to listen and understand the members’ needs.

“There was a strong desire within the club to improve turf quality and the overall definition of playing areas.

“There was a feeling the focus had been too heavily weighed in favour of environmental issues and not on playing surface quality.

“Now there are pine trees that don’t belong in a downland environment and areas of scrub that need to be controlled, but that should not be the priority.

“The majority of the 800 or so members are over 60, don’t hit the ball too far but enjoy their golf and prefer to play on good greens and firm, consistent surfaces throughout.

“They also wish to complete a round in less than four hours, preferably without losing any golf balls. I felt that if I could provide such conditions, then I would have a contented membership.”



## Key Challenges on the Course Management Change

"The first 10 holes are on high ground rising to 755 feet. There is a thin covering of soil overlying chalk, which is free draining and provides excellent all year round playing conditions and tremendous vistas over open countryside. It also gets a bit 'blowy' so keeping the ball low is paramount!

"The lower eight holes are more challenging to manage, particularly three valley holes where drainage can be an issue. A greater depth of clay is present, particularly under some of the greens which were built using the standard 'cut and fill' technique. In general, I needed to improve turf density, particularly on those fairways which were thin and weak, thus being able to present the course with greater definition.

"A high sulphur based fertiliser was applied each spring to acidify the surface and encourage growth, particularly the more indigenous grasses. This has resulted in a better cover of grass which the members enjoy. Once this is established throughout, I will probably switch to a spring and autumn foliar feed.

"Drainage remains the key issue on those greens which were built-up. Aeration and top dressing have been increased, while keeping surface disruption to a minimum. Fortunately the upper profile is in fairly good shape with organic matter content at a satisfactory level. To help maintain this healthy profile, we opt for using the Dyno-Core attachment reels with 5mm coring tines at 30mm centres each month, along with periodic deep tining. To overcome the drainage problems, we have carried out vertical drilling on the worst affected greens on the lower holes.

"This process is started by making a hole cutting board to accommodate a six inch (150mm) wide drill hole. After removing a turf plug, a hole was drilled to a depth of between four and six feet (1.5m approx).

"Once the spoil was removed, the holes were back-filled with small gravel, a membrane placed on top and then rootzone added to the final 10 inches (250mm) before the turf plug was replaced. Initially, these holes have been inserted at random as we are still experimenting on the best solution, bearing in mind the diverse nature of the underlying soil.

"To date, we have had some success with drainage but we know more needs to be achieved. Watch this space!"

Managing turf and playing surfaces are one aspect of a Course Manager's role, but managing people and running a successful maintenance operation can be more challenging. Since much of this is gained through personal experience, I was keen to hear how Andy made the transition.

"Being Deputy is sometimes the more difficult position, since you are no longer 'one of the lads' but not the man in charge. You still have to support the CM even when you may feel that this may not be the best decision. Sometimes this means treading the line carefully! You are the CM's 'eyes and ears', often dealing with a situation before it becomes an issue.

"Once I gained promotion, responsibility was more clear cut - the buck stopped with me! I became responsible and accountable for the management of the course and my team. The club gave me the vote of confidence to lead, take control and manage the course in a professional manner, therefore I was in charge of my own destiny. Fortunately I inherited a good team.

"I did need to recruit a Deputy and hired Martin Goodwin from nearby Kingsdown Golf Club who is very experienced and qualified to Level 3. With a good supporting team in place, the next challenge was to bring all management files and processes up to date.

"Record keeping had been minimal and both budgetary control and risk assessments were handwritten. So we gradually updated each process on computer and ensured that all information was easy to access and relevant to the club's needs. It was also important that the lines of communication between myself and the staff were sound and that they were involved in as much planning as possible. Without their help and input, the task would be considerably more difficult.

"We are first and foremost a team and that means sharing the workload. I have a very good working relationship with both the General Manager and Chairman of Green; the latter position usually being a two year stint. The members also have a voice in the form of a constructive comment sheet which is 'managed' by the club. This allows me the opportunity to explain in more detail the methods and practices used and why it necessary to do so. Good communication via newsletters and even personal presentations are what clubs expect nowadays."



Transportable bridge made by greenkeeping team



Drilling 1.3 metre hole with powered auger



Removing 6 inch plug prior to hole drilling





Dug out hollow formerly used for cock fighting next to 6th green

## Conclusion

I asked Andy for any guidance or tips he could pass onto greenkeepers looking to make the next upward move in their careers.

He replied: “Firstly, ensure that you have the necessary training and qualifications.

“I was fortunate that although my level of qualifications could have been better, it was necessary to play to my strengths of working on heathland and downland courses.

“Using this knowledge was invaluable. It is essential to be computer literate and have good budgeting, management and communication skills.

“Be confident, review your CV and when it comes to the interview, make sure you have walked the course beforehand, finding out as much as you require in order to make an impression. In other words be prepared...because you may only get one chance.”

