



the set of standards the greenkeeping team works to written down.

“Everyone should know the standards that you work to – General Managers, Committees, staff etc, and if any changes are made these should be made known. It’s like the Policy Document and would include things like the number of times you rake the bunkers, cut the fairways etc.”

Working out how many hours are spent doing various tasks through the week also makes it much easier to identify what jobs would have to be dispensed with should the man hours available to the Course Manager be reduced through a reduction in overtime or redundancy.

It says much for the skills of the country’s Course Managers that even with cut backs at many golf clubs over the last 18 months standards have been maintained or even raised.

“You have to be adaptable, roll with the punches and move with the times. You can’t be stuck in your ways.

“There is nothing in our job that we can’t do. There is always an answer and a way of making something work but when it comes to the longer term those with bents and fescues greens will probably

cope better financially. They will have fewer inputs, less disease, less fungicide so money and time spent maintaining them is always going to be less, but you can’t change to a more sustainable approach overnight so it’s a long term project.

“People can work towards this though because the next recession is only 10-15 years away. It’s one of those facts of life. It goes round in circles,” warned Les.

Off the course Les is also a great advocate of personal development and has some advice that can keep that on track without costing a penny.

“Training can be quite expensive, particularly if money is tight but it is important to keep it up and it can be done even if you have virtually no budget at all.

With the BIGGA Library you can be sitting at home in an evening adding to your knowledge for just the cost of return postage.

Section Training events can also be very useful and can be for a little as £15-£20 a day. Not a lot of money and something you can always pay out of your own pocket if the club has no money in the training budget.

The Government fund some NVQ training for the younger greenkeep-

ers and is a good way of motivating if no pay rise is available.”

Les is very much of the view that the way to succeed is to be the best club of your type in the area.

“You want to be the best club full stop but if you can’t be that you’ve got to be the best you can be in your target market. If you are at a lower end pay-and-play you make sure you are better than the next nearest lower end play-and-play.

“It’s a case of doing the right things, keeping it simple and not making it over frilly.”

**ABOVE:** Manor House GC at Castle Coombe, taken by Gian Povey, and showing how good a course can look.

**BELOW:** Example of a well raked bunker



# Loads of Money

Ian Henderson gives some sound advice for ensuring your club's financial survival

**As recently as two years ago, funding for golf clubs was easy. Golf was considered a very good risk, and while some of the more recently established proprietary clubs were scrutinised more closely than a 100 year old members club, the business was generally arranged without too much difficulty.**

How things have changed. With golf clubs considered part of the leisure industry, the clearing banks and finance houses have lost most of their appetite for our business.

Without doubt life has become more difficult for many golf clubs.

There have been casualties, and there will be more. Golf clubs however, are resilient beasts, and the well established members' golf clubs will continue to survive, and indeed some will thrive albeit at the expense of others.

What the lenders fail to address is that golf clubs which have graced our land for 100 years and more have witnessed several crisis. Two world wars, depressions, fashion swings and they are still here to tell the tale.

As you would expect at a time like this, there has been a downturn in machinery replacement, with many clubs making do for another year or two. The quality of the machines





ABOVE: Photography by Dean McMenemy

available today, combined with regular maintenance means, in many cases a fairway mower scheduled for replacement after five years will last seven or eight years. The only thing a club must be aware of is the cost of hanging onto a machine for too long.

Where a five year old mower may be worth £5,000, if it requires a major repair, which could cost between £3,000 and £6,000 it will still only be worth £5,000. So it is true to say there will come a point where you can start throwing good money after bad.

The repair costs would go along way to covering the annual lease cost for a new replacement mower.

Machinery finance is generally still readily available, and while fixed interest rates do not reflect the current bank base rate of 0.5%, rates are generally favourable and finance offers great flexibility.

For larger projects such as clubhouse renovation or course improvements, the rules have changed dramatically. In years gone by projects under a cost of £50,000 were regularly funded simply with an unsecured loan.

In today's market any project where we are looking at longer term, large value funding, without doubt the funder will look for tan-

gible security, normally by way of a first charge over the course and clubhouse.

According to a respected golf club specialist, values of golf clubs have fallen between 5% and 15% over the last two years.

Once the project has been agreed and costed, there is no certainty funding will be available. Over the past two years the funders have become very adept at finding reasons not to agree facilities.

## It is true to say there will come a point where you can start throwing good money after bad.

In addition to making funding difficult, most of the lending houses have taken advantage of the lack of funding to significantly increase their margins and fees.

In 2005 it would be reasonable to assume a facility of say, £500,000 could be secured at around bank base rate + 1.5% - 2% but in today's market you could be nearer bank base rate + 3.5% - 4%

The fee structure has also increased with arrangement fees of 2% quite common.

We are in fairly difficult times,

which have seen huge changes in attitudes toward money. Many golf clubs who considered themselves cash purchasers, are now looking to utilise machinery finance and spread their cost.

The current situation has also spurred many clubs to look at the way they conduct their business. It is always difficult to carry out major changes, but because it has always been done this way, does not mean it is right.

Traditional systems and methods are no longer suitable in today's marketplace and more efficient management is being implemented in many golf clubs.

**More than ever careful planning is required for all aspects of the golf club business.**

- Machinery Finance
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- Overhead controls
- Staffing costs

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# Disease Control

## A new way of thinking

### Background

Sherriff Amenity, working with independent research organisations such as the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) and with chemical manufacturers, have carried out extensive trials on the efficacy and compatibility of fungicide tank-mixes. This work was commissioned in order to provide new and innovative solutions to the turf disease problems experienced by our customers.

### Tank-mixing

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no reason why all golf clubs cannot ride out this difficult period, and come out the other end stronger than ever.

It is vital that golf clubs have a long hard look at the way they do business. It is no longer enough to look at the bottom line when the annual accounts are lodged at the AGM. Each department must be isolated and assessed on its own merits. It is all very well having a fantastic bar turnover, but what do you do if the catering is dragging it down? It is all very well having a waiting list and good members' income, what do you do if visitors are turned away and made to feel less than welcome.

A few clubs are in the envious position where money is of secondary importance, for the rest of us we need to make sure all parts of the jigsaw fit together to give a complete picture.

Hard decisions may need to be taken; many of them will prove unpopular, but not as unpopular as standing up at an EGM to explain the need for £150 levy per member for the next five years!

Successful clubs are now looking at ways of generating income from alternative sources. If you have 500 members and 5,000 visitor rounds per year that is how much revenue you will generate in 12 months.

If you have the facilities to accommodate members' functions, such as weddings, anniversaries, birthday etc exponential additional income can be raised without altering the basic golf income streams available.

Simple things like offering 10% discount for visitors if they book lunch or dinner at the same time as booking golf or reduced buggy fees if the buggy is reserved at the time of booking can make a big difference to the overall profit at the end of the year.

If your club charge £25 per person per round. You only need one fourball per day, Monday to Friday, April to October and you will generate an additional £16,000 income per year!

The demographics of golf clubs are changing significantly. We are seeing the average age of existing members increasing and a huge number of junior members leaving clubs as the turn 18 and transfer to the adult section. This coupled with the general exodus from many clubs, means there are several important issues needing addressed.

Senior discounts: Many clubs operate schemes where senior members, with a specific number

of year continuous membership are entitled to up to 50% reduction in their annual subs.

The problem is the number who qualify for this has increased dramatically to almost 35% of the entire membership in some cases. In truth many of these members have taken early retirement, play at least five times a week, and have more expendable income than a 40 year old man, with a large mortgage, and a family to support. It is vital clubs redefine the rules. While there is mammoth resistance to any sort of increase aimed at the seniors, and bearing in mind they make up the majority of members and turn out en masse at any AGM or EGM,

**Family Inclusion:** With your average medal round taking just over four hours, an hour's travel time to and from the golf course, and diet coke and a sandwich with your playing partners, it's not just a Saturday morning.

It is important that golf clubs today offer more than just golf. If there are activities where the whole family can become involved, the entire day becomes much more inclusive and less contentious. Mixed competitions including Gents, Ladies, Seniors and Juniors, with a buffet and prize giving at the end can be very successful and rewarding. It is also worth considering awarding the spouse of a full member automatic

## Successful clubs are now looking at ways of generating income from alternative sources.

it important new rules are set going forward. It may be possible, for example to restrict the reduced fee seniors to five day memberships, which would free up valuable tee times at weekends.

**Junior retention:** Years ago, 75% - 80% of boys and girls turning 18 found a job within 10 miles of where they were brought up. Today 80% plus will leave their home town and travel all over the world to universities and colleges to gain knowledge in their chosen subject. The chances of them returning home is fairly limited, so we need to face the fact it is nigh on impossible to keep the juniors, as their subscriptions increase to senior rate.

If it were possible to charge a nominal fee to "keep them in the fold" and allow them to play for, say a visitors' guest fee, it would be a start.

**Second club membership:** In the past people who were fortunate enough to belong to two clubs have made a choice of one club or the other. Geography will often dictate if they stay or go, but flexibility in fees and restricted access can often encourage them to stay, in one shape or form. To retain a member, even if that includes changing categories means there is still income potential from that person.

The dropping of joining fees has also contributed to the "Nomadic Golfer" who club hops from year to year.

By providing the best course in the area along with a welcome and good value for money catering can ensure your club is where the club hopper lays down his roots.

social membership of the club, and encourage them to make use the facilities on offer.

While money may not be as readily available as before, it is not all doom and gloom.

With a positive sustainable programme and a properly thought future, it is still possible to secure the funding required for you and club to survive and thrive.

Ian Henderson is Managing Director of Golf Finance.  
[www.golffinance.co.uk](http://www.golffinance.co.uk)



# Match Made



# in Heaven

The relocation of the World Match Play Championship to Finca Cortesin was an incredible coup for the relatively new course. But as Mark Alexander finds out, bringing one of the richest tournaments in golf to Spain wasn't all plain sailing



**Finca Cortesin is a new, luxury resort located an hour's drive south of Malaga.**

The course itself slipped under the radar when it opened in 2006 which is surprising considering the quality of Cabell Robinson's routing through two wide ravines. Finca's fortunes changed however when it succeeded Wentworth in hosting the World Match Play Championship in October. Not surprisingly, interest in the young upstart began to pick up.

It was after all big news - opening a new course in Spain's saturated southern fringes is one thing, but opening one and then securing a European Tour event is something else. It was a move that also prized one of the richest tournaments in golf from Wentworth's steely grasp, which at a time of manic cost cutting has to be admired.

"The initial business plan included the idea of hosting a big tournament so the course has been designed to be a championship course, with its length," said Javier Reviriego, Director General of Finca Cortesin.

"It's not a course for everyone."

At 7,445 yards off the back pegs, Finca certainly has the length to challenge the very best tour players, as Ross Fisher found on his way to clinching the title against Anthony Kim; the first to be won away from Wentworth since the tournament's inception at the Surrey course in 1964.

Describing his victory as a "long, grueling week", the 28 year old admitted the course tested every part of his game.

"This course is very demanding, not only mentally but also physically," he said.

"All departments of my game were strong: the new driver seems to be going really well, my short game was pretty sharp and there were some shots out there that really paid dividends."

But Finca has far more than just length up its sleeve. The greens typically have narrow approaches flanked by deep bunkers. The 18th is a prime example with no less than nine bunkers surrounding the putting surface. Bearing in mind, this is a 567-yard, par five finishing hole that plays up hill all the way, you get some idea of the demands placed on the players.

The 15th is another stormer. This sweeping dogleg left covers 452 yards and has its apex protected by five sprawling sand traps. Played from elevated tee positions across a ravine and up an imposing slope to a green with incredible views, this hole tests players' courage as well as their brawn.

There are plenty examples of epic holes at Finca which demand accuracy and length off the tee, but the added threat of a stiff breeze off the Mediterranean makes it an intriguing place for competitive golf. In fact, the risk-and-reward strategy that permeates its way through the course began when the decision was first made to bring the match play tournament to the Med.

"It was earlier than we had expected but the opportunity to bring a very prestigious tournament to Finca was too good to miss. We couldn't say no," said Javier.

"The last year has been hectic with the golf course. We've had to do things that would have normally taken three or four years to complete but we decided to do it because it was too good an opportunity."



Being thrust into the media spotlight has certainly helped Finca gain valuable column inches and alluring TV coverage, but as Reviriego admits, there were also risks involved.

"When you host something like this, you better be prepared," he warned.

"Especially in a situation like we have where everybody will compare us to Valderrama and Wentworth. It was certainly a way of putting us on the map quickly, but it could have also worked against us if we weren't prepared. We only have one chance to make a first impression, so we wanted to make sure everything was perfect."

The man in charge of ensuring perfection on the course is Ignacio



Javier Reviriego, Director General of Finca Cortesin.





Soto, Finca's Head Greenkeeper. After 14 years plying his trade at courses like Valderrama and Soto Grande, he moved into construction and in January 2009 was employed by Finca as a consultant to oversee the course preparations. Seven months later he was offered the job as Head Greenkeeper, and he hasn't looked back since. If the truth be told, he hasn't had time.

"There was a lot to do on the golf course - until they hired me, there wasn't a Head Greenkeeper," he admits. One of his first jobs was sorting out the drainage.

"The sub soil is a 100% expanded clay - it's like plastic so it doesn't take any water. Whenever we get a lot of rain, it runs through the two top layers, so we need proper drain-

age with gravel. Unfortunately, some parts of the course weren't originally done properly."

But the course's drainage was merely an aperitif to the main bulk of work that had to be completed before the World Match Play Championship could take place. For instance, despite the gloriously undulating landscape that affords wonderful views over both the Med and an impressive mountain range that acts as a suitably dramatic backdrop, the site was blighted by electricity pylons that serviced a nearby village. If a European Tour event was to be held at Finca, the pylons had to go.

"All the wires went underground," said Ignacio.

"It was a big job and very expen-



ABOVE: The glorious greenery and mountainous surroundings of Finca Cortesin - the new, luxury resort located an hour's drive south of Malaga.



sive, costing around €8 million. But the golf course wouldn't be the same if it hadn't been done because you now have beautiful, uninterrupted views to the sea."

The work to rebuild holes 11, 12 and 13, through which the pylons crossed, was started a year after the course opened. It was essential if disruptive work, and it wasn't the only change needed to host a premier event like the World Match Play.

"We changed the grass on the green aprons," Ignacio explained.

"Originally, they were fescue. It wasn't the right type of grass because the water quality isn't suitable and it's very difficult to play out of. So we changed it to 419 Bermuda, which we use on the fairways, tees and rough."

In fact, only the greens escaped the Bermuda treatment, covered instead with L93 bentgrass. The transition from fescue to Bermuda around the fringes took eight months and was completed well ahead of the build-up to the tournament. Cutting it a little finer was the work to rebuild the 116 bunkers, 30 of which were completed in time for the World Match Play.

"More or less all of them had problems with clay bases," Ignacio explained.

"Due to the heavy rains and underground water, the clay mixes readily with the sand creating bad

playing and drainage conditions. To rectify the situation, we're using a fairly new technique where we clean the bunker by taking out all the sand, gravel and drainage, and put in a polyethylene sheet into all the contours of the bunker right up to the edge. We then put the drainage on top of the sheet and on top of that we put a plastic net which allows the bunker to drain but won't let the clay or gravel back up. On top of the net, we're depositing new, silica sand, which is different to our old sand. It's like crushed marble. It's a looser, cleaner sand which creates much better playing conditions."

At a cost of €30/m<sup>2</sup>, the sheet-and-netting option isn't cheap, but it is necessary and was being implemented right up to the start of play.

"I hope to have all the bunkers done for next year," said Ignacio.

"It's a big job, but it's the worst area of the golf course right now, and the bunkers will only get even worse if we don't do anything about it. But it's not just for the tournament, it's something we want to do to improve the course generally."

What immediately strikes you about Finca Cortesin is the quality of the service that extends throughout the resort from the front-of-house staff through to the club house and finally to the welcoming smile the attendants give you as you pick up

your buggy (which is absolutely essential). The attention to detail would be unnerving if it wasn't for the considered approach taken by the staff who convince you effortlessly that their intention is to make your stay as pleasant as possible.

It seems this policy has been wholeheartedly embraced by Ignacio and his 25 greenkeepers who busy themselves preparing the course and, more importantly, undertake improvements that would send shivers down the back of many others.

"Irrigating this course is very complicated," he continued. "We have a lot of undulations so we have many different levels to water. Getting the right amount of water to the right area is very difficult. That's why we have 2,000 sprinkler heads to adjust."

Finca Cortesin is the rarest of golf resorts. It has set its standards at the highest levels and is delivering on them across all departments.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the golf course where perfection is the goal and attention to detail is the norm.

The World Match Play Championship is set to be played at Finca until 2011 with a possible three-year extension.

If the resort's first effort is anything to go by, one of the richest tournaments in golf might have found a new permanent home.

**ABOVE:** Ignacio Soto, Finca's Head Greenkeeper, stands proudly in front of his immaculate course.



#### about the author

Mark Alexander is an award-winning golf course photographer and established journalist who works for magazines, resorts and architects. Brought up in St Andrews, it seemed inevitable that he would work in the golf industry although initially his work took him to London and various roles in publishing. Since then his work has appeared in various golf publications not to mention a host of websites and corporate marketing literature. He balances his photographic work with writing and occasionally a round of golf – with a camera never too far away.