

Making the mark

Following its close working relationship with local schools and its county to develop golf for all, Northamptonshire County GC was able to develop a six-hole par three course that opens this month. The club's secretary, **Peter Walsh**, details the story



NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY GOLF Club will celebrate its centenary next year and there is no doubt it is a well-established, traditional club. Fortunately, it also has a forward-looking management team that has served the club well. The club decided at an early stage that it should pursue the policies and structure of obtaining the English Golf Union (EGU) / English Women's Golf Association (EWGA) GolfMark award and was the first in Northamptonshire to achieve this acknowledged recognition of a positive and welcoming environment for coaching and the development of golf.

In 2005 a 'Whole Sport Plan' for golf was written by the England Golf Partnership. Counties were then encouraged to translate this national strategy into a local plan that identifies and addresses issues that can take golf forward in their area. Northamptonshire

seized the opportunity and was one of the three pilot counties in England to work in this new way. Northamptonshire County Golf Club was happy to support the partnership and the plan. A part-time development officer, Richard Lobb, was employed to ensure the plan was moved forwards in the prescribed areas. Working closely with the clubs, they were initially encouraged to take up the two EGU and EWGA 'Junior Club Coaching' and 'Free Golf Coaching' grants. These provide clubs with coaching time for youngsters and taster sessions for potential club members.

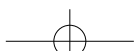
Those clubs that were supporting the county strategy were asked to submit any facility development plans for the consideration of financial support through the 'Community Club Development' grant. Golf was allocated £1.1 million of lottery and exchequer funding to support those clubs wishing to improve their practice and playing facilities and open them up to the community at large. In Northamptonshire two clubs came forward and were supported by the

county partnership in the bid for assistance. They were Peterborough Milton Golf Club, to develop its current practice ground into a short game and driving range practice area, and Northamptonshire County Golf Club, which wished to develop a six-hole, par three course.

Both clubs were working closely with the county in the promotion and development of the coaching player development strategy and were the base for county development squads.

These two clubs, along with others in the county, have begun to identify the need to work closely with the local schools. Using the local club professional to visit local schools to deliver Tri Golf and Xtreme Golf initiatives, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of beginner golfers wishing to access the clubs' facilities. Those clubs wishing to formulate this into a firm link can register with the England Golf Partnership as a 'Community Link Club'. The scheme allows the club to link with local schools and provide an exit route via easy stepping stones

Images on this page: the first site visit to Northamptonshire County GC, the work that was carried out, someone caught on camera chipping onto the new surface and an artificial green



GOLFMARK



to coaching at the club. The stepping stones are taster and beginner lessons at the local club and introductory junior memberships. England Golf provides assistance with equipment, resources and funds for coaching.

Tim Rouse, head professional at Northamptonshire County Club, was keen that the club should further develop the existing practice facilities and, with the aid of course architect, Cameron Sinclair, and myself, plans were put together to improve the practice ground and upgrade the facilities and provide a six-hole short course. The original idea was just to keep cutting and improving the 'greens' that were being used for practice but that soon proved it would be inadequate. "Can't possibly be too expensive to build half a dozen greens and tees" was the view until the actual quotes landed on my desk. The project might well have been shelved at this point but, fortunately, with the guidance of Kelly Hanwell, regional development officer of the EGU / EWGA, a successful application for funding was put to Sport England and the project then gathered pace.

At this point, a seed change occurred. An idea was floated, initially extremely quietly, that perhaps we should consider putting in 'artificial greens and tees'. "Whatever next?" was the cry. However, the pro and I visited Nailcote Hall's par three course near Coventry and were very impressed with the artificial green built by Southwest Greens. Others were encouraged to look at this facility and a sceptical Cameron Sinclair was quietly impressed too. Much discussion ensued and

Southwest Greens was eventually invited to Church Brampton to provide a quotation for the six-hole course.

The additional costs of the Southwest Greens facility made it seem that the initial outlay might be too significant, even though the huge savings in maintenance expenditure over the years ahead would be a great advantage. The 'partnership' with many others had brought us this far and it would be a great shame having reached this stage if it would all come to nought. That moment yet another partner decided to throw in their help and finance. We will always be grateful for all the assistance we have had but the final push from Barclays Spaces for Sports was just what the doctor ordered.

The application to Sport England was installed to include the Southwest Greens installation and the new funding from Barclays, the final go ahead was received at the end of January and Darren Senior and his team from Southwest Greens moved on to site towards the end of February. It was extremely cold but the weather didn't stop a well-executed installation. The weather was not at all helpful when the club's greenstaff had to carry out their part of the process. The turfing of the banks and surrounds was delayed considerably and even with such extremes of weather delays the finish is very good. We are only grateful that we were slightly sceptical about the weather and decided to delay the official opening of the club's 'Colt Course' until later in the year. This will now take place in the last part of this month and everything should be spot on by then.

The PGA Club Professional Seniors

Championship was again held at Northamptonshire County Golf Club at the end of May and the PGA has some exciting plans for a competition to be held on the Colt Course. This should be a really good launch for the par three course and an interesting test for a new facility for some of the 'traditional' players.

The only problem we face at the moment is keeping people off the course – naturally there are large numbers that are really keen to play it and there have been one or two reports of some virtual golf that has been played – some reported that they were delighted with how the ball stayed on the green when they'd 'hit a proper shot' – others have stated that the putting is so consistent and true that it is bound to improve their game. We don't actually know how they have tackled the new holes and not been spotted – but we can't be everywhere all the time.

All in all, bringing together all the parties involved in this 'partnership' has been hard work at times. Occasionally it has been so frustrating that it was tempting to contemplate withdrawing from the whole process. However, there have been so many plusses that that possibility was never really on the cards. The club's wholehearted support of such a technically-advanced facility has been great to see. The help and encouragement from the local county partnership, the regional development officer, Sport England, Barclays, Southwest Green's Darren Senior and his team, course architect Cameron Sinclair and our club professional, Tim Rouse has been fantastic. This new par three Colt Course will be a great asset for the club in developing young golfers and starting many into the game. It will be of considerable benefit to some of the older players who find 18 holes too much and could keep them playing for a few more years. It will also let them play a few holes in 45 minutes or so and keep their interest in golf alive. In fact, as I seem to be in two of those categories I can't wait to play it myself but I suppose I'll have to for a little while yet. See what a partnership can achieve! **GCM**

Images on this page: the new par three course at Northamptonshire County GC

