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NUMBER 151 | SUMMER 2025

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“FOR THE SECOND TIME THIS YEAR, MY CLUBS HAVE BEEN ‘MISLAID’
BY BRITISH AIRWAYS, WHICH WAS, UNTIL RECENTLY, MY FIRST-CHOICE
AIRLINE FOR TRAVEL”

FAIR COMMENT

If I had a euro for every time somebody's told me how glamorous my life is, jetting between continents to visit great golf clubs, I would be an ex-publisher. But, living out of a suitcase — indeed, my colleague David Bowers insists I could live IN a suitcase — is not all it's cracked up to be. I seldom get to enjoy the exciting cities I fly into because I have meetings to attend and then must move on to the next destination.

And that means, I suffer from the curse of the frequent flyer as much as anyone, despite currently having gold 'elite' status with British Airways (BA). It doesn't matter if you turn left or right when you get on a plane, we're all still prone to fall victim to delays, cancellations, and lost luggage.

And here's the nub. For the second time this year, my clubs have been 'misaid' by British Airways, which was, until recently, my first-choice airline for travel before they announced changes to their frequent flyer programme which makes achieving 'status' literally impossible. But, I digress...

My clubs were first delayed on a connection between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in March — though, to be fair, they were sent on the next flight, delivered to my hotel overnight and were waiting for me in the morning. But still.

In May, they were lost on a BA flight back from Alicante, which was more of a pain as I was due to fly to Dubai — again with BA — two days later. I fly with my clubs around 30 times a year, and although I've been close to losing them completely before, it's never happened, yet...



Words

Michael Lenihan
Publisher

READ THE FULL COMMENT ONLINE
golfmanagement.online/comment/151



FEATURING

SUMMER 2025



ADAM CALVER

KUALA LUMPUR GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB

"Good agronomy, I still think is the foundation of what we do. All the clubs I've been at, when the course was in great condition, our revenue grew. When the greens struggled, revenue goes down."

22



KARL WHITEHEAD

SAADIYAT BEACH GOLF CLUB

"The UAE was the place to be, so when a position was advertised at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club and I applied, thankfully my references were from good people, and in this industry, references are the most important thing."

26

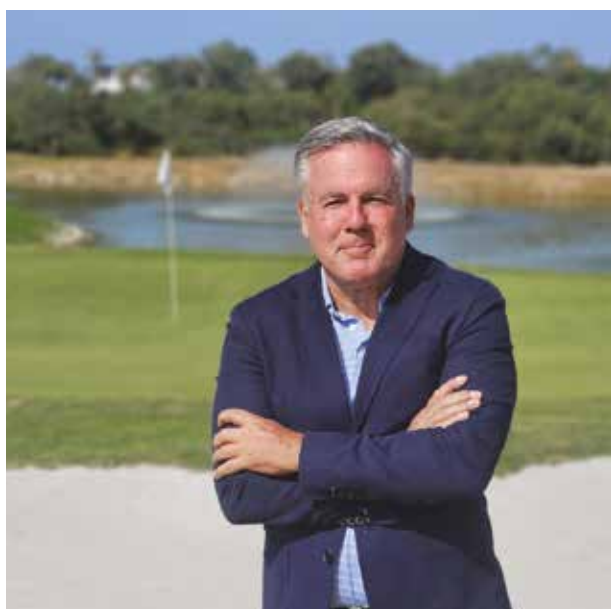


TOM MUNT

ST IVES (HUNTS)

"Very soon after I started playing, I became fascinated by the strategic design of golf courses, and I suppose the theoretical challenge they posed. From a young age I started drawing golf holes, and redesigning golf holes."

30



STEPHANE TALBOT

ROYAL GOLF DE MARRAKECH

"Morocco is totally different, and we do sell it a lot as a cultural experience. I tell people don't come just for the golf and stay at the resort and come to the golf course. Morocco is one of the few countries where you can mingle with the locals."

34



ALASTAIR HIGGS

RAIN BIRD EUROPE

"Rain Bird Corporation's guiding philosophy is 'The Intelligent Use of Water', so it's not about using necessarily less or more, it's about using the right amount in the right place at the right time."

42

"*VILAMOURA GOLF REFLECTS OUR VISION OF REPOSITIONING THESE
ICONIC COURSES TO OFFER AN UNPARALLELED GOLFING EXPERIENCE"



COVER STORY

VILAMOURAGOLF.COM



Vilamoura's golf courses have unveiled a bold, new identity to showcase the rich history and premium offerings as one of Europe's top golf and leisure destinations.

*Vilamoura Golf' represents an unparalleled collection of courses that have been rebranded from Dom Pedro, including the iconic Old Course, the second oldest course in the Algarve and a hallmark of the region's golf heritage.

Alongside the Old Course, are the Pinhal, Laguna, and Millennium courses, offering golfers a diverse portfolio of exceptional venues.

The creation of the *Vilamoura Golf brand marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of the celebrated resort. The cohesive identity of *Vilamoura Golf ensures that each course – from the timeless prestige of the Old Course to the modern versatility of the Laguna and Millennium – shines as an integral part of the Vilamoura experience.

The new brand is linked to the overarching Vilamoura brand, connecting the golf courses to the destination, which has undergone significant investment in recent times to reposition the destination.

Ahead of the *Vilamoura Golf launch, the Old Course celebrated its own refresh in late 2024, introducing a new monogram logo, designed to celebrate craftsmanship, exclusivity, and timeless sophistication.

Complementing the rebrand was the opening of a new, state-of-the-art clubhouse.

Featuring elegant upgrades and modern amenities, the clubhouse blends vintage charm with contemporary flair, offering a welcoming space for members, guests, and the Vilamoura community to unwind and savour the upgraded '19th hole'.

New logos have also been introduced for the Pinhal, Laguna, and Millennium courses, highlighting their individual characteristics while preserving their connection to the broader Vilamoura brand.

"*Vilamoura Golf reflects our vision of repositioning these iconic courses to offer an unparalleled golfing experience," said Nuno Sepúlveda, Co-CEO of DETAILS, who manage *Vilamoura Golf. "Through significant improvements to the courses, facilities, and overall service, we've elevated the standard for golfers visiting the Algarve.

"Each course presents a unique challenge, and the *Vilamoura Golf brand embodies this diversity while uniting them under a shared identity of excellence. This rebrand honours their rich legacy and also highlights our commitment to innovation, ensuring golfers enjoy world-class experiences that showcase the Algarve as a premier destination for sports and leisure."

DETAILS is managing the rebranding, repositioning and golf course operations, with the goal of solidifying Vilamoura's reputation as a world class sports and leisure destination, and includes the unveiling of the first Els Club in Europe which is due to open this summer. **END**

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"I'VE NEVER MET RORY, BUT, FOLLOWING GOLF AS I HAVE DONE DOWN THE YEARS, I'VE GROWN TO FEEL HIS PAIN WHEN THINGS WENT WRONG AND SHARE IN THE JOY OF HIS SUCCESSES"



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foregetmenotgolf.co.uk



RORY, THE MASTER, MADE ME CRY

I've always felt sorry for people who didn't enjoy sport. I truly believe it is the one thing, outside love, which can take you to incredible highs and despairing lows and still have you coming back for more. I never cried when my favourite band made number one in the charts; when my favourite author released a new best-seller; or when my top TV show rose to the pinnacle of the viewing figures – although I will admit to having something in my eye at the end of the final episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. But I will happily admit to crying when my football team, so long in the doldrums, won the FA Cup in 2008 and, in 2024, when they won the EFL League One title to get back to the second tier for the first time since 2012.

Previously, my emotions had reached that level only when I looked down at my new-born son in my arms. Sport can do this, because we invest so much in those we follow. And not just in team sports. It can also leave us taking personal satisfaction from the achievements of others in individual sports; people we've never met but feel as if we know personally because we have a weird attachment to them.

Which brings me on to Rory McIlroy and his 2025 Masters victory. I've never met Rory, but, following golf as I have done down the years, I've grown to feel his pain when things went wrong and share in the joy of his successes. I'm sure it's a feeling we can all relate to, whether it's Rory, Tiger, Jon Rahm, Scottie Scheffler, or, even... Patrick Reed. It's not a case of living a life vicariously, it's just that, in sport, we tend to nail our colours firmly to a mast and then suffer the same joy and pain as our hero(es). I did it with Andy Murray and choked up when he won at Wimbledon; and I do it every time Europe wins the Ryder Cup – with apologies to any US readers out there, but, to be fair, I think you have much bigger things to worry about currently.

Yes, dear reader, this is my long-winded way of saying I welled up when Rory put on that Green Jacket. I'd been 'with' him – albeit largely from a sofa via satellite broadcasting – for many years and, if I'm totally honest, I thought his Masters chances had gone. There were too many really good new kids on the block. But this year's event showed that, in both Rory and Justin Rose, there's no substitute for a combination of talent, experience, grim determination, and confidence in one's own ability. I've achieved one of those four by virtue of being 62 years of age, which explains why, invariably, I three-putt.

It's only natural for those of us who live and breathe sport that we have our favourites, whether in team or individual events. That doesn't mean I don't appreciate other people's skills, abilities and achievements, just that I wish they hadn't won and that the title had gone to whomever I was supporting on this occasion. Of course, it's possible to appreciate sport without having 'skin in the game' – as I think young marketing types say these days. But it's when one has a genuine emotionally vested interest – and I don't mean gambling – in one of the participants, that sport exceeds everything else and can provide exceptional joy. **END**

NEWS IN BRIEF

GOLFMANAGEMENT.ONLINE/NEWS



ROYAL APPOINTMENT FOR DUMBARNIE LINKS GENERAL MANAGER DAVID SCOTT

The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews has appointed David Scott as its Honorary Professional. Scott becomes the sixth person to hold the role and succeeds Jim Farmer who passed away late last year. A PGA Master Professional, Scott was elected Captain of the PGA last month and is a former Captain of PGA Scotland. He has held a number of senior executive roles in golf and is a well-known figure in UK and Scottish golf.

SEARCH 'DAVID SCOTT' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



ALCANADA SHINES A LIGHT ON POLLINATORS ON WORLD BEE DAY

Club de Golf Alcanada is celebrating World Bee Day by looking back on five years of beekeeping on the grounds of the acclaimed Mallorca golf venue. An initial eight beehives were installed on Alcanada grounds in the spring of 2020, meaning this World Bee Day marks almost exactly half a decade of hard work from the club's dedicated staff and hundreds of thousands of insects.

SEARCH 'ALCANADA' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story

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SEEING IS BELIEVING AT ECOBUNKER SERIES OF OPEN DAYS

Bunker specialists EcoBunker welcomed 20 greenkeepers and club managers from across Devon and Cornwall to its latest club open day, hosted by Newquay Golf Club. The EcoBunker open day series is being held across the summer, giving club officials and greenkeeping teams around the UK the chance to draw on EcoBunker expertise in bunker design and maintenance, and to better understand the benefits to be gained from employing EcoBunker technology at their course.

SEARCH 'ECOBUNKER' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



TAGMARSHAL AND PLAYERS 1ST FORM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Tagmarshal – the market leader in golf course optimization and pace management technology – has entered a strategic partnership with Players 1st, the foremost player experience and post-round survey platform in the golf industry. Working together, these two data-driven companies will offer course managers and owners a wealth of information on player satisfaction within all aspects of their operations.

SEARCH 'PLAYERS 1ST' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



CAMIRAL GOLF & WELLNESS NAMED PARTNER RESORT OF PGA OF GERMANY

Camiral Golf & Wellness, formerly PGA Catalunya, has been named an official 'Partner Resort' of the PGA of Germany, becoming the network's only partner destination in Spain. This exclusive three-year agreement with the largest PGA in continental Europe with over 2000 members, solidifies Camiral's standing as one of Europe's premier golf destinations for playing professionals and coaching groups.

SEARCH 'CAMIRAL GOLF' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



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THE R&A ANNOUNCES ALOHA AS PREMIUM SUSTAINABLE AGRONOMY VENUE

The R&A is pleased to announce Aloha Golf Club has become the first Iberian Peninsula club working with The R&A Agronomy Service on a premium 'Venue' support agreement. As part of The R&A's growing focus on delivering performance through sustainability, The R&A Agronomy Service applies fact-based evidence to actively promote agronomic and playing quality excellence, as well as turf performance, across the global golf industry.

SEARCH 'ALOHA' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



TROON INTERNATIONAL SHINES A LIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH

The physical and mental health benefits of golf are well documented, and beyond the positive impacts for golfers, the wider golf industry is stepping up support for the dedicated professionals who keep the sport thriving. During Mental Health Awareness Week (May 12-18) celebrating the power and importance of community, Troon International highlights the importance of fostering a culture of care and focus on associate wellbeing within its global community of golf facilities.

SEARCH 'TROON' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



TIDWORTH LEADS THE WAY WITH AUTONOMOUS MOWER INTEGRATION

Tidworth Golf Club is proud to announce the successful integration of a fleet of Husqvarna autonomous mowers into its golf course maintenance operations, marking a significant milestone in the club's ongoing commitment to innovation, sustainability, and course excellence. Following extensive planning and collaboration between the Board and Course Manager, this forward-thinking transition replaces traditional operator-driven equipment with state-of-the-art robotic technology.

SEARCH 'TIDWORTH' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



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PRINCE'S TO STAGE THE 53RD WALKER CUP IN 2030

Prince's will stage the 53rd Walker Cup between Great Britain and Ireland and the United States of America in 2030. The renowned venue on the glorious Kent coastline will host the biennial team contest for the first time. Prince's staged The Open in 1932 — famously won by Gene Sarazen — and hosted Final Qualifying for The Open from 2018 to 2022. The famed links in Sandwich also has an illustrious history of staging leading amateur events, including The Women's Amateur Championship most recently in 2023.

SEARCH 'WALKER CUP' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



AL ZORAH INTRODUCES ALL-FEMALE CADDIE INITIATIVE

Al Zorah Golf & Yacht Club, one of the Middle East's most prestigious sporting venues, has launched a pioneering all-female caddie initiative in a move that is set to redefine personalised golf service in the region. As part of a pilot programme, an initial group of eight caddies will work across Al Zorah's acclaimed Nicklaus Design championship course, newly opened clubhouse and practice facilities in the club's latest move to enhance the luxury customer experience it offers to members and guests.

SEARCH 'AL ZORAH' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story



INFINITUM OUTLINES MASTERPLAN TO ELEVATE HILLS COURSE INTO GOLF'S ELITE

Catalan resort INFINITUM has released new details about ongoing renovations to its popular Hills course, which promise to elevate the worldclass.golf destination to the upper echelons of European golf. Work on the back nine of Alfonso Vidoar's 'modern classic' began this January and will conclude in October, enhancing both course conditioning and playing experience while also making a stunning visual impact.

SEARCH 'INFINITUM' ONLINE

at golfmanagement.online for the full story

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LONDON GOLF CLUB PARTNERS WITH PETER MILLAR AND G/FORE

London Golf Club members, guests and staff look set to dress to impress this golf season thanks to a new partnership with Peter Millar and G/Fore. The partnership – which begins immediately – will see Peter Millar and G/Fore become title sponsors of London Golf Club's 2025 Order of Merit season, with the winner receiving a fantastic prize from both brands. Two of London Golf Club's biggest golf day events will also be supported by the brands..

SEARCH 'LONDON GOLF CLUB' ONLINE
at golfmanagement.online for the full story



AMATA SPRING'S MIKE MCKENNA ACHIEVES PRESTIGIOUS CCM DESIGNATION

The Club Management Association of Europe (CMAE) is proud to announce that Mike McKenna, General Manager of Amata Spring Country Club in Thailand, has successfully earned the distinguished Certified Club Manager (CCM) designation. Recognised globally as the hallmark of excellence in club management, the CCM designation reflects a deep commitment to professional development, operational expertise, and strategic leadership within the private club industry.

SEARCH 'MIKE MCKENNA' ONLINE
at golfmanagement.online for the full story



GOLFZON LEADBETTER ACADEMY SET TO LAUNCH AT MARCO SIMONE

Marco Simone Golf & Country Club and Golfzon Leadbetter Academy have announced a ten-year partnership to create an unparalleled coaching environment for both amateur and professional golfers. The first Golfzon Leadbetter Academy in mainland Italy will open this summer at the renowned Rome venue, host of the 2023 Ryder Cup. The partnership will focus on a comprehensive upgrade to Marco Simone's practice areas, providing state-of-the-art technology, expert coaching, and elite training facilities.

SEARCH 'GOLFZON' ONLINE
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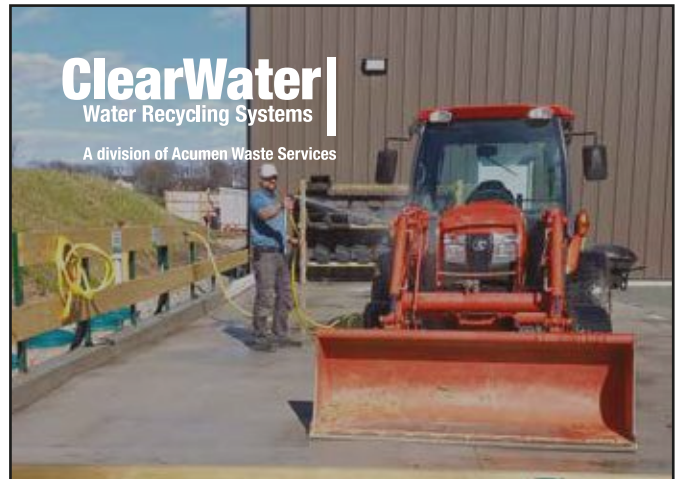
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NEW DESTINATION

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Royal Golf Marrakech has become the latest destination to join worldclass.golf – a portfolio of the world’s premier golf courses, destinations and resorts.

Nestled in the heart of Morocco, Royal Golf Marrakech is a historic gem that combines tradition, natural beauty, and world-class golfing. Established in 1927, it is one of the oldest golf clubs in the country, offering a unique experience steeped in heritage.

Surrounded by lush gardens, towering palm trees, and panoramic views of the majestic Atlas Mountains, this club provides an idyllic setting for golfers of all levels.

The Royal Golf Marrakech features two courses: the iconic 18-hole Old Course and the charming 9-hole New Course. The Old Course, designed by Gustave Golias and later enhanced by Arnaud Massy, is celebrated for its classic layout, narrow fairways,

and mature eucalyptus, cypress, and palm trees that challenge players with precision and strategy.

The New Course, a more recent addition, offers a complementary experience with its modern design and slightly more forgiving fairways, making it perfect for those looking to refine their game or enjoy a shorter round.

The clubhouse, with its elegant Colonial architecture, exudes timeless charm and provides the perfect retreat for relaxation.

Its inviting atmosphere is complemented by one of Marrakech’s finest restaurants, renowned for its exceptional lunch offerings, where guests can indulge in exquisite Moroccan and international cuisine.

Following a recent visit, Michael Lenihan, CEO of worldclass.golf said: “The entire club oozes class, and is a very welcome addition to the growing portfolio.” **END**

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ADAM CALVER

GENERAL MANAGER, KUALA LUMPUR GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB



KUALA LUMPUR
GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB

Sitting in Adam Calver's office at the Kuala Lumpur Golf & Country Club in Malaysia prior to playing the West Course, I was struck by just how much experience he has, for someone so young.

With spells growing-in the Earth and Fire courses at Jumeriah Golf Estates in Dubai; working as vice-president of golf and development for Ben Cowan Dewar at Cabot; and a six-year stint as director of golf and agronomy at Laguna Golf in Vietnam, Canadian-born Calver has a lot to offer.

Not to mention he is also a global representative for Faldo Design who he has a close working relationship with and is vice-president of the Asian Golf Industry Federation.

As he marks one year in his role as general manager at the 36-hole Kuala Lumpur Golf & Country Club (KLGCC) located just 8km west of the world-famous Petronas Towers, Calver quips that although he's 45, "I probably feel like I'm 60."

He has been tasked with the overall resort management of a club, widely regarded as the best in Malaysia, which spans 222,000 sq feet and has arguably one of the biggest clubhouses I have ever visited in world golf.

And the Canadian-born Calver, who has a degree in Applied Science and who majored in Golf Course Management and Agronomy, has some impressive plans for the destination, both on and off the course.

"Good agronomy, I still think is the foundation of what we do," he states. "All the clubs I've been at, when the course was in great condition, our revenue grew. When the greens struggled, revenue goes down.

"If you don't get the course, and the product right, then everything else is a really tough sell. My whole philosophy has been 'Product, People, Price' and our product is greens... we're selling green fees, and if the greens aren't good, nobody's popping champagne after they've just five putted on some crappy greens."

Which perhaps explains one of the many reasons why Calver was appointed a year ago, to oversee the redevelopment of the East Course – in partnership with Faldo Design – which will see all 18 greens rebuilt, and bunker locations changed to improve attack angles.

With the West Course, priced slightly higher currently than the East, the plan is in early November – just after the Maybank LPGA Championship – to begin work, which Calver anticipates should be completed by the following September.

"We're planning to keep nine holes always open on the East Course as we still have a high demand, and we don't want to overload the West Course. And at the same time, if we only close nine at a time, technically, we can still maintain the same number of rounds."

And once the work is complete, Calver intends to bring the price point of the East Course up to the same as the West as he explains.

"The East Course greens hadn't been upgraded in 15 or 16 years, and they were originally paspalum and eventually they got contaminated with Zoysia, and a little bit of Bermuda so we want to get the greens to the same standard as the West Course.





"MY WHOLE PHILOSOPHY HAS BEEN 'PRODUCT, PEOPLE, PRICE' AND OUR PRODUCT IS GREENS... WE'RE SELLING GREEN FEES"

"And on the fairways, we're looking to transition from a Bermuda to a Zoysia grass which seems to perform better in these regions. The ball sits up a little better, and it will be easier for a lot of players to pick it cleaner."

The philosophy behind the renovation is to elevate the entire golf experience for members and visitors alike and raise awareness of KLGCC on the international stage.

At previous clubs where Calver has worked, he has advocated an optimum 50:50 split between member and guests rounds, so if one of those segments slows down, you can increase the other. But at KLGCC, he seems to be content with a slightly different approach.

"We want to stay at 70 per cent members here, if not 80 per cent, as we grow that segment," he says, adding that "but we do want to show off the club to tourists a little bit on the international stage.

"We do host the LPGA right now, and the club has hosted 23 professional events in the past, so we do want to have some accessibility for people to play both courses.

"In the past, the club hasn't really done a lot of active sales for tourism, so what we've had over the years is because people know of it from all the events, and it's the premier club of the country.

"Access was tough, and it was hard to book because of availability, but we definitely want to be the flagship for Malaysia Golf, and that this is the place you want to try and come and see."

Located on such a large development, and with 4,000 members, KLGCC offers an array of facilities away from golf, many of which are housed in the clubhouse, which Calver admits is "a massive building, with lots of stuff going on.

"We've got three lobbies and we're actually going to have to have some type of a valet system I think because it is confusing for tourists if you're not from here," he laughs.

"The East Lobby has got a Korean barbecue restaurant, an Indian restaurant, a French and Italian restaurant, a whiskey cigar lounge, and a Chinese restaurant.

"The main lobby is where our piano lounge, ballroom and meeting and function rooms are, and upstairs a Japanese restaurant.

"Then the West lobby is the golf lobby, which is where the locker rooms are and the golfers terrace.

It's got restaurants overlooking the 18th green [on the West Course], and it's also got a swimming pool, and upstairs, a member's gym. Downstairs we have a movie theatre, and a bowling alley.

"And then we have our Royal Suite upstairs with a penthouse for VIP guests, and a VIP golfers terrace overlooking the course, so yeah, there's a lot going on," he smiles.

And if that wasn't enough for Calver to manage, he also oversees the conference centre across the road, plus cricket and lawn bowls. Oh, and the three-storey driving range, golf academy, tennis, badminton, squash and pickleball courts, and the golf merchandise superstore located opposite the entrance to the West lobby.

"I run everything, and I have another golf resort that I oversee, so my title, technically is CEO of Leisure, but GM of Kuala Lumpur Golf & Country Club is just easier to say, especially as it's kind of 80 per cent of my focus."

When asked how – and when – he finds time to switch off, he says: "There's definitely some long stretches, but it's all good. I do try to get away and go explore Malaysia and do some snorkelling."

With his wife and daughter still living in Vietnam – which Calver referred to as his second home – does he have any regrets about leaving behind the tranquillity of the country?

"I still go back every once in a while, and we're back and forth this year as my daughter is finishing up school, and my wife is still working. Every time I go back to our place at Ocean Villas, I'm like, 'oh yeah, I get it. This is nice' but its big city life compared to living on the coast."

With such a large mandate at KLGCC, Calver sees his involvement as a ten-year project and is seeking to employ a club manager soon.

"I don't have a succession plan yet, and I am working on that as it's a lot right now," he confesses. "I am interviewing for a club manager and hoping to bring in someone to take over all of our fitness and wellness activities. We've got someone in charge of golf now, so I've recruited a pretty good team so far.

"My intention is that the next decade I will be in this job. It's a good time for Malaysia – the company is doing well; the economy is doing well and so is golf." **END**







Words Michael Lenihan
Online viyagolf.com/saadiyat

KARL WHITEHEAD

CLUSTER CLUB MANAGER, SAADIYAT BEACH GOLF CLUB



Ask any up-and-coming general manager, and they will probably all say the same thing... managing a golf operation is becoming increasingly more challenging, with demands not only from members, but owners alike depending upon which side of the divide you are employed on.

So, for a moment, imagine the pressures that managing not just one, but three world class golf destinations bring, in one of the most demanding customer-focused environments on earth... the UAE.

With seven-star hotels, glitzy eateries and high-wealth customers demanding the very best in customer service, the UAE has become a mecca for visitors the world over.

Ask any frequent flyer these days, and most will say that the Middle Eastern carriers offer a level of service far beyond their US and European competitors. And it is this level of service, plus attention to detail, that many within the golf industry aspire to.

When The Emirates Golf Club opened in Dubai in 1988, it became the first golf course in the Middle East and set the standard many have followed ever since.

Now part of Dubai Golf – which manages Jumeriah Golf Estates and Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club – its sister company, Viya Golf, manages three courses in neighbouring Abu Dhabi... Yas Links, Saadiyat Beach Golf Club, and Yas Acres Golf & Country Club.

And the man tasked with managing the Abu Dhabi trio is 41-year-old Englishman, Karl Whitehead, who has the title of Cluster Club Manager, and a responsibility many would dread, but one which Whitehead appears to relish.

As I sit with Whitehead in the boardroom at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club, it is apparent that he feels at home, and in familiar surroundings following his appointment in February 2024. And that, in part, is due to the small fact that Abu Dhabi has been his home since 2012.

Like many within the industry, Whitehead started his career in 2005 at The Belfry as a golf professional but soon realised that teaching wasn't for him.

After obtaining a BA Hons in Applied Golf Management Studies from Birmingham University, he spent two spells at the Marriott Forest of Arden, sandwich between working at Celtic Manor in 2010 – the year of the Ryder Cup, a period he has fond memories of.

"It was incredible," he recalls. "It felt like you had such a strong purpose, and there was a buzz, and energy every single day. Tiger Woods was in his prime, and the build-up to the Ryder Cup was hard to describe.

"The place was just buzzing every single day, and it just didn't feel like work. I would be driving to work excited every day."

Following Europe's famous victory, he was invited to return to the Forest of Arden as golf operations manager, a move which ultimately opened the door to his current life in the Middle East as he explains.

"A good friend of mine, Phil Waine [now GM at Trump International in Dubai] went from the Forest of Arden to Abu Dhabi Golf Club, which at the time, was managed by Troon.

"I flew out to see him in 2011 for a holiday, played some golf in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and got to learn more about Troon.



“IT WAS JUST UNBELIEVABLE, AND EVERYTHING WE DID WAS ALL ABOUT QUALITY, AND HOW DO WE MAKE THIS THE BEST IT CAN BE”

“I remember thinking at the time that the UAE was the place to be, so when a position was advertised at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club and I applied, thankfully my references were from good people, and in this industry, references are the most important thing.”

Whitehead was successful in his application, and so started a ten-year tenure with Troon, and his love affair with the Middle East. “For me, this was the place to work,” he recalls.

“There was a sense of adventure, a new challenge, new environment and a new culture. Everything’s different, everything’s new, and you become a better person for it.

“The Middle East is so attractive because it’s so innovative. It’s so fast-paced, what they’re trying to achieve here – they are trying to be the leading country in the world.”

Reflecting on his first stint in the UAE, Whitehead adds: “It was an incredible time. Saadiyat Beach Golf Club was already establishing itself as a stand out venue, and Abu Dhabi’s golf scene was really gaining momentum in 2014.

“The golf club was brand new; the team was incredible; the budgets were supremely healthy, and the market was good. I loved it!

“It was just unbelievable, and everything we did was all about quality, and how do we make this the best it can be – I’ve actually never seen anything like it since in terms of that focus.

“Then I received a phone call from Mark Chapleski [Troon vice president] offering me the role of director of golf at Montgomerie Dubai, and I actually turned it down,” he recalls, as he had just met his wife and was very happy in Abu Dhabi.

But after being persuaded by Chapleski that it was a great opportunity, he spent two years in Dubai, during which time he won Troon’s director of golf of the year award.

“Mark is a very smart man, and actually, it turned out to be one of the best experiences, maybe even the best of my career and most important,” he confesses.

In 2016, Whitehead’s reward for leaving Saadiyat Beach Golf Club was his first GM role at The Els Club in Dubai, where he spent four years before curiosity got the better of him, and during covid, he felt that in order to broaden his horizons – and career prospects – he needed to look further afield.

“I spent over eight years in the Middle East and had a strong appreciation for Asia.

“I was fascinated by how different the golf business was over there, but also from a career point-of-view, I’d done Europe, and I’d done the Middle East, and I wanted the chance to do another continent.

“I don’t know many people that have actually worked in three continents. Having Asia, Middle East and Europe separates you because a lot of people get bracketed as UAE people.”

Whitehead spent the covid years working at Vattanac Golf Resort in Cambodia, an experience which appears to have made more of a lasting impression, than the brief two-year spell he spent working for Golf Saudi before returning to Abu Dhabi last year and starting his career with Viya Golf.

“There are a couple of things [at Vattanac] that are amazing, and their F&B was the best I’ve ever seen. They have two courses and seven Japanese style tea houses on the course. Some of them are over two floors, and they are absolutely incredible.

“In terms of the experience in Cambodia, you play six-balls, not four-balls,” he explains. “Six-ball is the norm, and you can even play eight-ball, ten-ball, 12-ball or 14-ball if you want.

“It’s unbelievable, and the difference is that every single person has an individual four-seater golf cart, and you have a caddy, and a lot of people take two caddies. It’s ready golf and everyone over there is on the same wavelength.

“You’re not worried about the pace-of-play – you’re there to enjoy the day. And if there is an eight-ball in front of you, and you’re a four-ball, they just drive past and play the next hole and then come back later and play the hole they’ve missed.

“It sounds chaotic, but it’s not,” laughs Whitehead. “But it teaches you that it can be done. And coming back to Abu Dhabi where we see an increasing number of VIPs play, it gives you the ability to know that you can handle events like this, no matter what.

“There’s many different ways you can do it, but it’s having the open mindset, whereas if you stand there and say, ‘no, that can’t be done’, you could put yourself in a difficult position. So, it was eye opening to see what can be done when it needs to be done.”

And as to his future, he calmly sits back in his chair and says: “Right now, honestly speaking, I’ve got my blinkers on. It’s all about Abu Dhabi.” **END**

TOM MUNT

GENERAL MANAGER, ST IVES (HUNTS)



Just about to enter his teenage years, young Tom Munt, like many kids of his age, was a mad keen footballer. But following a car crash which damaged his knees, young Munt was faced with a dilemma no one ever wants to face, yet alone someone so young.

"At the time, I went to see a specialist who said they could operate and there would be a 50 per cent chance that my knee would get better, but a 50 per cent chance that it would get worse," he recalls.

The other option available to him was to live with the damage to his knee, with his specialist warning that he would never play contact sports such as football and rugby, ever again.

"So, after a long conversation, and as a relatively young person, I thought, well, I don't really want it getting any worse. So, at that point, I gave up contact sport and stopped playing football, and rugby, although I was never any good at that," he laughs.

A friend of his introduced him to golf, and in his own words "became slightly addicted pretty quickly when I realised, I wasn't very good at it. Most sports I've been able to instantly kick or hit a ball without having to think too much about it, but with golf, it was a revelation that I couldn't even hit this damn thing... so I got completely hooked at the desire to be better at this game and fell madly in love with it."

And that fascination with the game, helped shape a career in the golf industry, and an obsession which even saw Munt re-design the clubhouse at March Golf Club – a nine-hole layout in Cambridgeshire – as part of his GCSE project whilst at school.

"Very soon after I started playing, I became fascinated by the strategic design of golf courses, and I suppose the theoretical challenge they posed. From a young age I started drawing golf holes, and redesigning golf holes. I was a junior member at March Golf Club up the road, and I put together a hypothesis on how they could redesign it into an 18-hole golf course through the acquisition of four more fields around it.

"I was probably 15 at the time, so that, I suppose, was the point at which my love of playing the game became a fascination, and with the course particularly.

"As part of my GCSE project, I added tennis courts and built another floor on the clubhouse for a restaurant, so the facilities that are part of the game of golf, and my intrigue with maybe how to do that better was definitely something that I developed when I was quite young."

This obsession with the business of golf at such a young age appears to have hugely benefited Munt in his later career, but given his fascination with golf course design, did he ever contemplate becoming a golf course architect when he left school?

"No," he says, "but as part of my degree I did study golf management back in 2000. At the time, The Times newspaper listed the ten most ridiculous degrees in the UK, and number one was the Spice Girls, and number two, was golf club management which I was studying," he laughs.

"It was hilarious at the time, but it was early on in professional club management, and I was right at the beginning in terms of that qualification."







"WE STARTED CONSIDERING THE LOCATION AND NUMBER OF BUNKERS, AND THE FINANCIAL DIFFERENCE WAS RELATIVELY SMALL"

During his degree, Munt spent a year working in New York at Blue Heron Pines Golf Club, before returning to the UK with spells at Goodwood, and club management roles at Ely City and Saffron Walden.

Then, in 2018, he became his own boss when he and two business partners, purchased Toft Hotel and Golf Club in Lincolnshire, which as he recollects, seemed like a great idea at the time.

"I saw this opportunity [advertised] and thought, wow this has got everything... a hotel, a function business and a golf course, so I thought I'd could put myself in a position whereby I could make the decisions.

"I started negotiations with the owners and was able to put together a package where we bought it for just 95p, after the business was advertised for £350,000."

Events didn't quite transpire the way Munt and his business partners envisaged, and shortly after, reality struck. "Although we bought it for next to nothing, we inherited its problems – warts and all – which was fine.

"We had a plan, and worked through it for a while, but unfortunately, after eight-to-ten months, one of the partners decided he wanted out and was going to take a chunk of money with him.

"So that left me and the remaining partner in a position where we either had to fill the hole or get out relatively quickly," Munt states, who eventually, after discussing this with his wife, opted for the latter.

"We were less than 12 months into what had been a three-year plan, so it felt unfinished in terms of what it could have been. But nevertheless, within four months we were in lockdown and the person who we sold it to mothballed it two months later."

With the unknowns of the pandemic about to engulf the world, in late 2019 Munt sought refuge back in his home county of Cambridgeshire, and applied for, and was selected, for the position of general manager at St Ives (Hunts) Golf Club, just down the road from where he lives in Ely.

The club relocated to a brand-new inland links style course in 2010 after vacating their 9-hole parkland course on the outskirts of the market town, and as he explains, a great deal of work – on and off the course – has taken place during his stewardship in charge.

And the parallels between his GCSE project as a tender 15-year-old, and what he is overseeing at St Ives are quite startling.

Firstly, Munt has overseen the expansion of the clubhouse, with new function rooms and a new upstairs lounge bar with a soon-to-open balcony extending off the terrace.

Secondly, last year the club built two padel courts, and thirdly, under the expertise of William Swan of Swan Golf Designs, the club has embarked on a bunker improvement programme which Munt has taken more than a passing interest in.

"It started off as improving the quality of the bunkers, and the playability," Munt said, adding that "drainage was the key thing. And then really it was a case of the difference in cost between that and going a little bit further. So, we started considering the location and number of bunkers, and the financial difference was relatively small.

"We felt very much that because we were investing heavily in the best quality liners, and the best quality sand, we saw [the project] as a one-off.

"We tasked Will with reviewing the whole thing, and one of his strengths is that he is one of the few architects I've worked with who has the humility to not feel like everything has to be a Swan Signature Design."

Munt states that although the original Cameron Sinclair design was good, the feedback to the course – and especially how it drained – was mixed.

"Will has been able to deliver a top-quality product whilst being able to see all of the good that was already here," he says. "He has reinforced a lot of the existing design and on those holes where it feels like there was maybe a missed opportunity, or it hasn't quite worked, he's been able to enhance it."

When Munt took on the GM role six years ago, the club was losing money, despite having cash in the bank from the relocation. And testament to Munt's vision, is that the club is forecasting for the first time, a cash surplus this year.

Aged 42, Munt currently appears content at St Ives, and although he may have ruled out owning another golf club again in the future, has his sights set on a top club one day.

"I'm sure in my career, there will come a time to wear a jumper with a top 50 golf club logo on it, and to drink coffee and buy myself a Labrador," he smiles. "But really for me, I think the next step will be going somewhere that maybe I feel like I can make a real difference." **END**



Words Aidan Patrick
Online royalgolfmarrakech.com

STEPHANE TALBOT

DIRECTOR OF GOLF, ROYAL GOLF DE MARRAKECH



Stephane Talbot's journey in the world of golf is nothing short of remarkable. From his early days in Canada to his extensive career on various tours, Talbot has seen and experienced it all. However, it is his time in Morocco that has truly shaped his career and life in ways he never anticipated.

As director of golf at Royal Golf de Marrakech in Morocco, one of the oldest clubs in the Kingdom, Talbot's introduction to golf came at a young age.

Growing up in a golfing family, he was surrounded by the sport from the very beginning – his father was the president of their local private club, and his older brother was a professional golfer.

This environment fostered a deep love for the game, and Talbot spent countless hours at the golf course during his childhood.

After spending 12 years playing on Tours around the world, including the South American Tour, Asian Tour, and Canadian Tour, Talbot decided to transition into a different role within the golf industry, where he admits, he got fortunate.

"When I was on Tour, I often thought what I would do when my playing career finished, and knew I wasn't going to be a golf teacher for sure," he recalls. "I wanted to go into some kind of business, but it's tough as a touring pro as so many guys just end up teaching. But life takes you in certain directions, and I got lucky."

In 2002, Talbot was hired by the Palmeraie Golf Resort in Marrakech – an opportunity that came at a perfect time, as he was dealing with a wrist injury and was looking for a new direction in his career.

"I met a guy at the Montreal Golf Show who was talking to a friend of mine who's a golf pro," he says. "He'd been hired as a head-hunter for a family in Marrakesh that ran Palmeraie and they wanted a French speaking North American for the position.

"I had played in the Moroccan Open in 1998 and 1999 and remembered how friendly the people were, although I hadn't visited Marrakech at the time. I remember asking my wife what she thought about moving to Morocco, as she'd caddied for me back then, and she said, 'yeah, why not?'

"We had two young kids at the time, and with my wrist injury, the timing was perfect."

Talbot's role at Palmeraie was multifaceted, and he was responsible for managing all operations, which included overseeing the construction of three new golf courses, and one of the significant projects he worked on was the construction of nine holes at the resort in 2007 and 2008.

Despite facing challenges with local companies during the construction process, Talbot's determination and expertise ensured the successful completion of the project.

In 2009, Talbot moved to the Gary Player-designed Mazagan Beach & Golf Resort, where he was employed by Troon and played a crucial role in the development of golf in the north of the Kingdom.

His experience in building and managing golf courses in Morocco provided him with valuable insights and skills that he later applied to other projects.

Talbot's time in Morocco was not just about golf, and he found the country to be incredibly safe and welcoming.



"THE COURSE IS MORE ENJOYABLE NOW, AND WE'VE BEEN WORKING HARD ON QUALITY AS WELL AS THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE"

"Morocco is totally different, and we do sell it a lot as a cultural experience," he explains.

"I tell people don't come just for the golf and stay at the resort and come to the golf course. Morocco is one of the few countries where you can mingle with the locals and it's so safe."

The growth of the golf industry in Morocco has been impressive, and Talbot has been at the forefront of this development. He has seen the country evolve and become a popular destination for golfers from around the world, observing: "Morocco's growing, and with the [FIFA] World Cup coming to the country in 2030, everything is growing with new infrastructure too.

"The King has done a whole lot for this country and seems to have taken almost all of the right decisions, and we're now starting to see the results."

As he looks towards the future, Talbot remains optimistic about the continued growth and development of golf in Morocco, and especially at Royal Golf de Marrakech where he has been director of golf since 2019.

Nestled in the heart of Morocco, Royal Golf de Marrakech is a historic gem that combines tradition, natural beauty, and world-class golf. Established in 1927, it is one of the oldest golf clubs in the country, offering a unique experience steeped in heritage.

Surrounded by lush gardens, towering palm trees, and panoramic views of the majestic Atlas Mountains, the club provides an idyllic setting for golfers of all levels and features 27-holes of exceptional golf – the original Old Course, and the nine-hole New Course, which opened for play in 2008.

The new clubhouse, with its elegant colonial architecture, exudes timeless charm and provides the perfect retreat for relaxation.

Its inviting atmosphere is complemented by one of the finest restaurants in the city, and is renowned for its exceptional lunch, where guests can indulge in exquisite Moroccan and international cuisine, making dining here as memorable as the golf itself.

And it is the guest journey throughout the club where Talbot says that he's again been highly fortunate.

"I've been lucky enough that the ownership gives me total control of the golf course, and I don't have a resort manager, or villa

owners that can put pressure on you, so it's all about the golf, and the experience which is an advantage for me.

"With the new clubhouse, and excellent F&B offering – coupled with the renovation of the golf course – the club has kind of positioned itself at a higher level," he admits.

"The course is more enjoyable now, and we've been working hard on quality as well as the visitor experience."

Membership has increased from 220 when Talbot assumed the role six years ago to 400 now, which he admits is "probably too many."

But with 52,000 rounds last year on both courses, of which 40,000 were green fee-paying visitors, it's clear to see where the lions share of revenue comes from.

"We only had 12,000 member rounds last year," he says, "so when visitors book to come and play, we do try and suggest that they book lunch afterwards, because in my opinion, the clubhouse is a special experience serving very good food.

"We've kept the quality of the food and the level of service really high for six years now, and people keep coming back – it's a great experience."

Membership is diverse – with nationalities from Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland and the UK – plus some Canadian brethren, but it's not just on the course where there is growth.

"I'm seeing more and more people from abroad – other than from France – buying property," he states. "The word is out – not to everyone – but a lot more people other than the French are buying in Morocco as we have the weather, the culture and it's so safe."

When asked where home is, Talbot who is 58, is quick to affirm that it's not Canada.

"We sold everything when we left in 2002," he says. "I go back two or three times a year, but Morocco is my home now. At one point I was trying to figure out where I was going to retire, but with the growth here, and the weather and the people, it's a no-brainer to stay in Morocco.

"When I retire, I may do summers in Canada, and winter's here – that would be perfect as the weather is so good. But I still think I've got another ten years before then, provided I stay in shape." **END**

OMBRIA ALGARVE

OMBRIA.COM

Words Aidan Patrick

Location Algarve, Portugal

Nestled in the rolling hills of the Algarve, just a short drive inland from the bustling coastal resorts, lies Ombria Golf just north of Loulé and only 30 minutes from Faro airport.

Opened in April 2023, this 18-hole, par 71 course has quickly garnered recognition for its exceptional design, commitment to sustainability and the unique golfing experience it offers.

Designed by the esteemed Portuguese architect Jorge Santana da Silva, Ombria Golf stands out as the first 18-hole course to open in the region since 2008, marking a significant addition to the Algarve's renowned golfing landscape.

In October 2024, Viceroy at Ombria Algarve opened its doors to welcome golfers, travellers and locals alike. Adjacent to the golf course and with far-reaching 360 de-

gree views of rugged Algarve hills and open plains, it's a peaceful, cultural and sensitively designed resort.

The architecture and interior design honours the history and culture of authentic Algarvian style, using locally sourced materials and techniques that reflect the region's heritage. This attention to detail creates a sense of place that is deeply connected to the surroundings.

The resort offers 141 rooms including guest rooms, suites and residences all set within 5.2 hectares.

These accommodations are categorised into 20 room types, distinguished by features such as terraces, large balconies with built-in seating, private pools and jacuzzis as well as small kitchens, pantries and dressing areas.







THE GOLF COURSE'S PHILOSOPHY REVOLVES AROUND "PLAYING THE LAND"

While the layout and furniture remain consistent throughout, each room offers unique views due to the varying positions of the buildings.

The golf course's philosophy revolves around "Playing the Land." This ethos prioritises minimising disturbance to the natural environment, seamlessly integrating the course with the existing topography, ancient trees and the meandering river valley.

Many original features of the former farmland, such as wells and irrigation channels, have been thoughtfully incorporated into the course design, lending it an authentic Portuguese character.

This dedication to environmental stewardship has earned Ombria GEO certification recognising its commitment to environmental and social excellence. Notably, during its construction, over 700 oak trees were planted and 1,800 metres of river habitat restored. An energy-efficient irrigation system utilises rainwater collected on the property, further reducing environmental impact.

Ombria Golf offers a distinctive playing experience compared to the typical coastal courses of the Algarve. While not a championship-length course, measuring 5,860 metres from the furthest tees, it demands strategic play and precision, making it engaging for golfers of all levels.

The front nine presents an exhilarating and challenging layout, marked by significant elevation changes and water hazards on several holes. The back nine, nestled in a picturesque valley, is slightly more forgiving yet equally captivating, with a natural backdrop of lush green hills and strategically placed trees offering both beauty and challenge.

Ten-minute flight times ensure a relaxed, unhurried round. This integration of world-class golf, high-quality accommodation, and environmental consciousness has seen Ombria Golf cementing its place as a must-visit destination for environmentally minded golf enthusiasts.

Viceroy at Ombria Algarve offers a diverse and thoughtfully curated dining experience across six unique outlets, each paying homage to the hotel's locality and utilising produce either grown on-site in their gardens and orchards or sourced locally.

Together, these dining venues create a vibrant culinary landscape that mirrors the variety of a town.

Café Central, a vibrant Portuguese bakery on the town's main square, offers home-made pastries, pastel de nata, wood-fired light meals and artisan goods in a cosy, social setting.

Nearby, Bellvino is an intimate wine bar where guests enjoy direct access to the sommelier, private tastings and a menu celebrating local delicacies such as traditionally cured Iberian pork, goat and sheep cheeses and estate-grown Maçanilha olives used in its signature olive oil.

At Ombria Kitchen, guests find a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere with buffet and à la carte options, seasonal dishes and pizzas cooked in a wood oven, all served in hand-crafted clay crockery.

Solalua delivers inventive, seafood-forward cuisine in a sophisticated yet casual space, with playful dishes like crab-filled "bolas de Berlim" and desserts featuring local honey and goat milk ice cream, paired with imaginative cocktails such as oyster, pear and gin with river mint.

For a more laid-back experience, Casa & Fora at the clubhouse caters to golfers with terrace dining, daily specials, craft beers and live sports screenings. Rounding out the offerings, Salpico, the poolside bar, provides refreshing bites like cured fish, finger foods, oysters and champagne.

Rich in meaning and designed to shift perspectives, immersive experiences lie at the heart of the hotel, an open invitation to explore the real soul of the Algarve and connect deeply with its cultural roots.

Each guest encounter is guided by locals whose families have called these hills home for generations, preserving time-honoured traditions with pride. From beekeeping and pottery to basket weaving, tile painting and horseback riding, every activity offers a glimpse into a traditional way of life.

Viceroy at Ombria Algarve is embraced by nature, with four swimming pools, three heated and one seasonal, set against sweeping valley and sunset vistas. Families are welcomed with thoughtfully designed spaces at the Kid's Club, featuring indoor and outdoor areas, a spacious playroom, a mini kitchen, and a nursery.

The holistic Spa by Viceroy offers a tranquil retreat complete with a thermal pool, eight treatment rooms and beauty services including a hair salon and traditional barber. **END**



ALASTAIR HIGGS

INTERNATIONAL SALES MANAGER, RAIN BIRD EUROPE



Alastair Higgs's first day in the world of greenkeeping was hardly inspiring. Not that it needed to be to ensure his complete diligence and dedication to the role as an assistant.

"I was 16 years and a month when I left school, and I went straight into a greenkeeping apprenticeship at a private members' club called Calcot Park in Reading. I remember my first day," he says with a chuckle. "They handed me a rake and said, 'off you go!'"

And off he went, into a career that – for 25 years – has been driven by a boundless passion that led him to become a head greenkeeper, course manager and then in 2016, a role with Rain Bird, the global leader in irrigation, where he is approaching the end of his first year as International Sales Manager.

"I remember being offered the [first] job," he continues. "I was with my dad on the way up to the Millennium Open at St Andrews and we had stopped somewhere near Newcastle when the phone rang. I was offered the position and ran around the car like a lunatic."

More fanatic than lunatic, one suspects. Higgs, a low single-figure golfer in his mid-teens, accepted that a career as a Tour pro was an unrealistic aim and instead committed himself to a professional life devoted not to improving his swing, but the condition of the course.

"Once you are a turf manager and fall in love with turf management I think it stops being a job and your professional challenges just continue to grow," he says.

"I was very lucky that people gave me chances in the industry at a young age to be a supervisor and then to lead a team.

"It had responsibilities that went with it, but for me that was the challenge I enjoyed. Not just about turf, but also another thing that I'm very passionate about is developing people and helping others be successful.

"Greenkeepers I employed as apprentices are now course managers themselves, that's something to be pretty proud of."

He can also take immense pride in being an example to fellow dyslexics that it need not be a barrier to pursuing a successful career, and he reveals it was the disability that prompted him to leave school and step straight into the workplace in his teens.

"I am severely dyslexic. Academically it was not that I was stupid, but I struggled to write enough on the page, in the time that was given, in a constructive way."

A further testament to his unwillingness to succumb to the disadvantage, besides his high standing in the world of turf management, is the fact that he recently submitted his dissertation to complete his MBA.

"I've undertaken two years of remote study, doing 16 hours each weekend, so I am really looking forward to getting my weekends back," he smiles. "I'm delighted with that."

"I've learned so much, pushing myself to do this, as formal education is so far out of my comfort zone. It has really helped me communication-wise as a professional, but also as a person to appreciate things in a slightly different way and to try to understand other people's businesses and challenges, as opposed to just your own."



"IT'S NOT ABOUT USING NECESSARILY LESS OR MORE, IT'S ABOUT USING THE RIGHT AMOUNT IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME"

It is the challenge of helping not just their golfing customers but also those in other sports alongside domestic, municipal, agricultural, and industrial arenas, to which Higgs's working life is anchored.

"Rain Bird Corporation's guiding philosophy is 'The Intelligent Use of Water,'" he comments, "so it's not about using necessarily less or more, it's about using the right amount in the right place at the right time."

To this end, Rain Bird – founded in 1933 in California – provides golf clubs with sophisticated systems that enable turf managers to control remotely every aspect of irrigation with user-friendly software complementing the hardware out on the course.

"You've effectively got a computer at every [sprinkler] head, talking backwards and forwards to and from the server. If you've got a high-end system you have control over every 18-metre circle of the golf course from anywhere in the world, at any time, for an unlimited number of people. When I began greenkeeping, we still had a digital timer.

"Effectively, Rain Bird has two types of core product: one that applies water and one that controls the application of that water. Those technologies work hand-in-hand and that's what we continually develop for engineering marginal gains.

"Because that's what we're talking about, marginal gains that give greenkeepers greater control, enable them to deliver high-quality playing surfaces, and optimise the use of water, energy, and human resources.

"A UK course with a system that covered greens and tees invested in a new system with full fairway coverage as well as tees and greens, and used 30 per cent less water overall, even though they had added the fairways."

Rain Bird has a principal partner in each of the countries in which they operate with a network of staff available to support customers and grow its business.

"The most important aspect in any seller's process is to listen. You've got two ears and one mouth, so you have to find out what the customer's problems are and then we have a fleet of solutions that can help them solve their problems or enhance their benefits.

"It could be a small thing that is easily resolved with technical guidance or a simple upgrade, or it could be that their infrastructure is failing and we need to work on a way to introduce them to people who can help with that."

Former National League football Match Official Higgs – "I had a few TV games and a few high profile appointments" – now lives in France with his wife, 14-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, where he is able to indulge his interest in running. The erstwhile Windle Valley Runners club member has completed multiple marathons.

"In this part of the world there are a lot of fantastic trails," he says. "There are two things that draw me to running: one, I either don't think about work, so it's a complete freeing up of space and it's you and no technology, or two: it's a great way to think things through and avoid making knee jerk reactions."

The latter scenario of using his running as another adjunct to his job seems more likely with turf management never far from his thoughts.

"There's not a turf manager out there that doesn't want to improve," he insists. "As an industry, turf management – whether that's in golf or in sport in general – you will not find a group of professionals that are as passionate about their environment.

"There are many jobs out there where people sign in at 9 o'clock, sign out at 5 o'clock and they don't think about it until the next day. That is just not the case in the turf industry."

With golf enjoying a boom that appears to be ramping up, Higgs says Rain Bird "is here to support the industry to be strong. We know we have a role to play and solutions that enable other people deliver results.

"Whatever we have today won't be the same in five years' time – products evolve and customer expectations will change – but from a Rain Bird perspective another core value is Timeless Compatibility.

"If a new software version comes out tomorrow it will work with hardware from the 1990s, so customers can confidently stay with us, benefitting from the latest innovation and expertise." **END**

FOCUS ON THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE TO BECOME A CREDIBLE WORLD-CLASS GOLF DESTINATION



The dictionary definition of the adjective 'world-class' is "ranking among the world's best; outstanding..."

It's clear, then, that its reliability in general everyday conversation has been undermined. The epithet has been applied – often erroneously – to everything from pies to airline travel. And being ranked 347 on a list is no guarantee of excellence.

And that's the problem for golfers when they start to research where they'd like to spend their cash on a 'bucket-list' golf course. Too often a club website will use the term 'world-class' to describe its golf course only for a golfer to discover it's far from the case when they play it.

It's on a par with that sign in your local hostelry that encourages you to try "Angie's famous roast potatoes." They may well be nice and crispy, but they're hardly famous.

And although everyone has different tastes, there are certain elements that one would assume all golfers would want to see at a 'world-class' golf facility – and they don't begin and end at a stunning course.

These thoughts were foremost in the mind of Michael Lenihan when he decided to launch worldclass.golf – a portfolio of the world's premier golf courses, destinations and resorts – "created in order to validate that every destination featured delivers an exceptional visitor experience."

Lenihan explained: "There are regular publications of the 50 best golf courses here, and Top 100 courses there, and they have a valued and rightful place within the sector. But so many of the elements within the process are subjective.

"Some people like links golf, some don't. Some prefer parkland courses. A golfer used to playing high-end courses may find a lesser course underwhelming, while someone with different standards may enjoy it.

And the golf course may be exceptional, but what about the rest of the experience.

"I was horrified to read recently that service plays no part in some of these course rankings, and condition only ten per cent."

For every genuine ranking or quality award in golf, there's another which isn't designed to help the golfer, existing simply to make a quick buck.

"In discussion with countless managers within the industry I determined there was a desire to take the subjectivity out of the 'quality' golf sector and to provide a standardised evaluation of services and amenities that helps golfers know what to expect.

"There are certain elements which ensure a destination stands out from the crowd. It's not subjective – they either have them or they don't. It's that black and white."

Lenihan's team has determined 12 touch-points which can contribute to a 'world-class golf experience', including bag tags, fresh fruit on the first tee, complimentary range balls and shoe-cleaning services, with more elements set to be introduced in 2026.

Destinations are reviewed annually, by a member of the worldclass.golf team, to ensure they are maintaining – or preferably increasing – the prerequisite touch points.

Additionally, it is recognising clubs with GEO certification, acknowledging those that meet sustainability standards, which is increasingly important to many golfers.





"THINK OF WORLDCLASS.GOLF AS GOLF'S EQUIVALENT TO BUSINESS-CLASS TRAVEL"

"In a word, it's about 'credibility,'" added Lenihan, who has worked within the golf industry for almost 30 years.

"If a destination hasn't got at least a quarter of those touch points then, at this point, they're not eligible to feature, because it's not where the visitor experience needs to be. It's not a case of person A liked that, but person B didn't. There's simply no subjectivity.

"You're not going to get a golf club going to go to the expense of giving away bag tags or providing fresh fruit or water if it's not already at the point where it's got a great aspirational golf course. We're openly dealing with the higher end of the golf offering here.

"If somebody wants to enjoy a world-class golf experience, they're prepared to spend the extra to achieve it. And the last thing they want is to be let down because somebody has made a specious claim that their resort is 'world class'."

The worldclass.golf website – which was completely re-built and re-designed for this season – recently introduced the facility to book stay-and-play packages directly with the member destinations, all with no commission.

"It suits both the club and the golfer, because direct booking allows for a more personalised experience, enabling golfers to communicate specific requests and receive tailored services, therefore enhancing their overall visit to the destination."

Lenihan added: "It enables the golfer to make requests such as booking a table for dinner after golf, and that's not always feasible through a third-party agent.

"In discussion with a GM recently, I was told the club seldom gets much information when receiving a booking through an agent, apart from the name of the golfers and the date of the tee-time.

"The GM shared his frustration that if the booking had been made directly with the club, they would have been able to provide a far greater personal experience before the golfers even arrived at the bag drop.

"Another, at a 27-hole facility, told me that when the club takes direct bookings, they are able to create packages where they may be playing nine holes in the morning as a loosener, then have lunch in the outstanding restaurant, and go out for 18 in the afternoon.

"Or flip it... 18 in the morning, have a longer lunch and go out for nine holes in the afternoon. It affords far more flexibility for the golfer."

It could be argued that, by its very nature, worldclass.golf is perpetuating the perception that golf is an elitist sport. But Lenihan deflects that accusation and said: "If you want a great day out – because golf is a day out, it's not just an hour or two – you have to pay for the best experience.

"I always equate it to air travel, where you often have different levels of service – economy, premium economy, business and even first-class. The airline offers you the same product, which is the ability to travel between two destinations, but the experience on-board differs hugely depending upon the cabin you book.

"And it's these touch points and extras on-board when paying for premium cabins which enhances your 'experience'. Think of worldclass.golf as golf's equivalent to business-class travel.

"You can go to some high-end golf clubs in the UK and pay more than £250 for a tee-time. But that's all it is – it's not a comprehensive 'experience'. You pay for the name, the history and the kudos that go with it.

"That's fine, if that's all you want, but you'll be lucky if you can get inside the clubhouse at some 'top' golf courses.

"That's just leaves a round of golf and your memories which are largely based upon how well you played. It's not an 'experience'.

He continued: "An average round of golf these days is four-and-a-half hours typically. If you turn up an hour before your tee-time and stay afterwards for a bite to eat in the clubhouse – let alone showering and changing – you're going to be there for another 90 minutes. That's what, seven hours? The best part of a working day.

"Some clubs are effectively saying 'we want you there for seven hours, but we're only going to focus on the four-and-a-half hours when you're playing the golf course as that's where it really matters.'

"That's simply not acceptable, as green-fee paying visitors at some self-proclaimed 'world-class' golf courses, sadly do not receive a 'world-class' experience.

Lenihan concludes: "worldclass.golf is not about promoting golf as an elitist sport; it's about maintaining credibility and standards at the top end of sport." **END**



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“I GUESS EVERYONE HAS A MOMENT THAT THEY CAN IDENTIFY AS A
KEY POINT FROM WHICH SO MUCH OF THE REST OF THEIR LIFE FLOWS”



GUEST BOOK

ANDY BROWN



Words

Andy Brown
Global Business Development
The Toro Company

I guess everyone has a moment that they can identify as a key point from which so much of the rest of their life flows. For me that was Thursday January 9, 1986. It was the morning after a college rugby match, followed by a typically heavy post-match debrief in the bar so I wasn't necessarily feeling 100 per cent.

However, I did manage to make my first seminar which was a guest lecture from an ex-student, Dee Smith. She was working for Action Aid, living with the Pokot tribe in North-East Kenya, building schools and clinics. As a result of meeting Dee, I went out to visit her that following June and spent three months studying the water use of the Pokot for my degree thesis.

Following my graduation, I went on to complete an MSC in Irrigation Project Management at Cranfield University, immediately transitioning into my first job working in Aid and Development based in Egypt from 1990 to 1994.

On my return to the UK, I then set up my own irrigation distribution and contracting business, before joining Toro in 1999.

Some 25 years later my involvement with irrigation continues, albeit now focusing on golf and sports turf, rather than agriculture and landscapes, however, it all stems from that first trip to Kenya. So, I have often wondered what might have happened to me had I not managed to make that lecture in January of 1986. **END**

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