

# COURSE MANAGEMENT

## A SHIFT IN METHODOLOGY TO SHORT GRASS GOLF



### **Course Report 2024**

When a year finishes, it naturally allows us to look back and reflect on the past year - what went well? What was ok? What issues arose? It's also time to look forward and think what we can implement or tweak to improve the course. I do this on an annual basis - draw upon my field notes from the past 12 months and pen thoughts, ideas & musings for the year ahead. Usually this is for myself and I relay plans to the team. I have yet to publish for others, however, at this particular time, I feel we are at a significant pivoting point in the practice of Course Management with the era of electric and robotic, automotive technology assisting greenkeepers.

While the report is specific to my experience at Whitley, I believe that there are learnings and methods of Course Management that might encourage thoughts that can be applied to all facilities.

## The Good, The Bad and The Ugly of 2023

### The Good

In general we were pleased with the overall performance of the course. In the main, we were able to present the course in good condition for most of the season. The dry Spring meant slow rates of grass growth initially, but then warm and wet weather gave rise to a late Spring 'flush' (see 'Bad' below!) which soon got the playing corridors in good condition post Winter.

We were assisted with irrigation by mother nature over the Summer months - which meant far from ideal golf conditions but the grass was thankful and remained a lush green throughout the season.

### The Bad

Late April and May brought some wet and warm weather which gave a significant 'Spring flush' to grass growth. While on the tees, green and fairways this is useful for Winter recovery, for the natural rough it meant thick, ball swallowing grass. These areas are typically cut and collected in early June by farm contractors. These areas provide great habitat cover for nature (hence the term 'natural' or 'eco-rough') but they can be all too penal for the golfer.

In recent years we have increased these natural grassland areas, not just for habitat creation, but equally in a drive to reduce our carbon footprint by eliminating unnecessary mowing and associated diesel use. However, 2023 meant that too many balls were being lost by golfers who ultimately want to have fun - losing golf balls is the opposite and I accepted that we have to increase the management and playability of these areas.

### The Ugly

The wet Autumn and Winter has meant more 'Course Closed' days than ever before. 2023 was the wettest year since 2018 (when we started to record rainfall) with 1219mm/49inches falling, compared to an average of 967mm/39inches (2018-2022). As a consequence, over the next 1-2 years we will be looking at solutions to improve the wettest areas, be it drainage on greens for example or building up areas such as historic ditches that are still lower ground.

As a response to these findings we refocused on our **Course Management Mission** or to put it another way: how we intend to present the golf course.

## Course Management Mission

The club runs on an ethos of being relaxed, fun and friendly. This is also true for the on-course experience, whilst offering *playability*, *intrigue* and *challenge* to all golfers along with making a positive impact on the environment and ecology of the course.

The 3 key words *playability*, *intrigue* and *challenge* frame our course ethos and form a foundation that we stress test against every decision or improvement we make.

### Playability

A course for all level golfers, all year round.

### Intrigue

Holes and features that are interesting and facilitate a fun time golfing.

### Challenge

The architecture of a course layout should provide a test to all golfing abilities and encourage strategy to playing a hole.

## How do we achieve this Mission?

Ultimately we have to (consistently re-evaluate the course, year upon year and adapt) change the set up of the course. My research, thoughts and musings led to a new concept - new to us at least and perhaps inland golf courses in UK in general. This concept I refer to is '*Short Grass Golf*'.

This set up should provide a golf experience that can encapsulate Playability, Intrigue and Challenge. Change doesn't happen overnight, but through day to day working practice we will work to the goals of firm turf suitable for play all year with minimal ball searching, quirky and fun features, while still making the golfer think their way around. Robotic mowers play the key role to achieving this in a sustainable manner, both in terms of ecology and as a business.

## Features of 'Short Grass Golf' at WGC

**Firm greens, surrounds and approaches** through increased sand top dressing is something that we work towards as standard practice, but we will look to budget for further applications.

**Closely mown areas around greens** and 'run off areas' which will give golfers the option of chip and run, along with a more aerial approach. Also, the 'transition' walkways from a green to the next hole will also be maintained to the same height of grass where possible..

**Larger tee areas**, initially this will be blending the raised tees into the lower teeing areas. Then through aeration, over-seeding, top dressing; the tee areas will improve and blend into the fairway. This will allow for a longer playing season on grass tees.

**Wider fairways**, narrow semi-rough giving wider playing 'corridors' of predominately fairway length. This will allow less ball searching and thus more enjoyment to the golfer, while increasing the pace of play.

**Reduced natural rough** areas due to the wider playing areas and need to improve playability.

Ultimately, the majority of the mowing of 'short grass' will be performed with our more sustainable robotic mowers to a height of 17.5mm and potentially 15mm. Allowing the greenkeeping team to tend to tees, greens, surrounds, semi-rough and natural areas.

### *As with all things, what, if any, are the drawbacks?*

Reducing the natural rough areas can be argued as a negative for ecology on paper. In practice though, we can manage smaller areas much better to promote biodiversity and then the mowing practice of robots will hugely lower carbon footprint of the course maintenance.

There will also be less definition visually between fairway and rough, but for the majority of golfers I think they would prefer to be hitting from the fairway turf over rough length grass. So, again not a significant drawback.

## Climate Change, the Environment: Sustainable Golf

The vision is a holistic approach that sees the maintained golf course sit seamlessly as part of the ecologically rich landscape, by blending the fine turf into biodiverse, natural areas that if found by the golfer is still playable. In a way, this is a return to the origins of golf and course management - maintain the golf parts (tees, fairways and greens) and the remaining areas managed for nature (it's worth noting that historically these areas would most likely have been grazed and thus still golf friendly to a degree).

For a number of years we have not used fungicides at all on the course and our only chemical input is a herbicide to control the undesirable species (weeds) in the tees, fairways, approaches and greens. Where possible we spot spray to reduce the volume of products used. All fertiliser is organic or natural products that focus on feeding the soil to provide conditions for the grass plant to survive and thrive. Working with nature, rather than against it.

The benefits of introducing robotic mowers can't be emphasised enough. Our biggest use of carbon is diesel & petrol, which for 2024 will be dramatically reduced as a result of the robots.

Smaller areas of natural rough managed with our resources to cut and collect the grass will gradually reduce the fertility of the soil. Less fertility will starve the thick, coarse grasses of energy and leave finer, wispy grasses and wild flowers giving a more biodiverse grassland that allows a golf ball to be found easier.

Proactive tree and hedge management is required throughout the site as a manager of the land. The key elements are:

1. Removal - this is never a desirable action but the tree(s) can be problematic for grass and golf. Reasons for removal might include: light issues; air flow; leaf litter; damaged or diseased; invasive; wrong location and too big.
2. Pruning / coppicing - this might be a possible alternative to removal. Though the action does encourage new growth which depending on the location may or may not be problematic.
3. New planting - this is mostly in 'out of play' areas to improve the design and aesthetic of the hole and define boundaries. Planting in such areas is of course a huge positive for our the wider environments biodiversity and helps reduce our carbon footprint.

In some instances we will look to manage some mature hedgerow boundaries as narrow woodland strips. This maintains the boundary but creates a more biodiverse area with new planting, while offering improved ball finding qualities if there is less undergrowth.

## Report Conclusions

The shift in approach to Course Management practices and embracing the Short Grass Golf concept is an exciting time. I read recently that golfers need *Hope & Engagement* while playing and without these the fun and interest is lost. Hopefully going forward the course will offer both of these senses to all golfers. At the same time the environment, within which the golf course sits, will thrive in wildlife and diversity.

### Further considerations this year to be researched:

1. Micro-contours - introduce more ground interest, in form of humps, bumps, hollows and hillocks, to what is otherwise a fairly flat course.
2. Water Management - source (mains, collection, reservoir, bore hole); form of irrigation - hand watering, automated pop up systems...etc.
3. Turf Nursery - for when we need to get areas back into play quicker.
4. Bunker Survey & changes - we are awaiting results of a survey undertaken in November 2023.
5. Composting & Mixing Materials (sand, topsoil...etc) onsite.
6. Tree & Shrub Nursery.

This report was written by Tom Nicholas, Director and Course Manager of Whitley Golf Club, Wiltshire. Feel free to get in touch on any matter from this report or other relevant golf course management topics.

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