



**Hello and welcome to Septembers Blog. I thought I would try an alternative format rather than the subjective commentary pieces I have used before. As per usual, I appreciate your thoughts but not your lawsuits.**

### **Winter Blues.**

I am somewhat used to disappointing summer's now. We never seem to get a really decent period of wall to wall sunshine like we used to (in the good old days). To make matters worse, I hear that frost and snow is actually forecast for the end of September.....that should go down well at Celtic Manor!? - better get the orange balls ready.

Winter in itself brings many connotations to the keen golfer. For a start, it's a chance to only carry a half set and get used to 'manufacturing' different and ambitious golf shots. Better still, just take 3 or 4 clubs instead and use the weight saving for a clandestine hip flask or two.

For me, links golf comes alive in the winter. There's no foliage loss on trees so the physical transition of the golfing landscape remains fairly constant. Playability is pretty much guaranteed and those who find the unpredictability of links golf too much in the summer through their fast and fiery temperaments will find that the volume is turned down somewhat through the cooler months. Fundamentally, it offers the chance to keep golfing skills tuned and golf fitness maintained.

It's also an ideal time for green keepers to rest specific areas on the golf course and carry out design modifications which would normally interfere with heavy course utilisation. The bulk of the off-course maintenance should be carried out now with a heavy focus on tree and shrub removal. It's amazing how many courses are not doing nearly enough in basic landform and ecology promotion – it can be a long and arduous task but the benefits easily outweigh the labour.

### **A Welcome in the Hillside?**

As mentioned above, the Ryder Cup is just around the corner. Almost ten years in the making, it means exciting times for Wales and its golf tourism enterprise. Their 'legacy' team have gone to extraordinary lengths to give Welsh golf the push it really needs. Will it sustain? Has it done enough to capture the imagination of all those cash wielding global golf tourists?

Whilst I think it has come a long way, I'm not too sure if it has gone far enough. With the exception of building [good] practice facilities, on the ground projects were rare and ultimately the range and diversity of golf courses remains exactly the same as it did ten years ago. Aberdovey of course was an exception – they took up the challenge and have elevated their operating profile significantly. Other courses such as Nefynn must look back and think did we actually 'develop the business' as

planned? Incredible setting, great people.....average golf course. Nefynn could be making zillions of cash if it truly adapted to the global golf perspective.

Those of a nervous disposition will be scanning an eye to the long range weather forecast about now. Playing so late in the season – especially on an inland / parkland course is always risky but I genuinely hope that the sun comes out and everyone has a great time. My prediction....well, it's very close to call. Corey Pavin is in there for good reason and that's because it's going to get tough. If they thought it was going to be easy they would be sending Freddie Couples. So get your entinox ready and prepare for a grueller.

### **Looking Back.**

It's about 6 months since we launched IHGC and things have been going very well. New projects are always exciting and rewarding. Please appreciate that I'm bound by confidentiality rules which prohibits me from 'glossing' up contracts and splattering them all over the website. Clients look to me to deliver them competitive advantage so information at that level is kept away from the front pages.

I have been impressed by the range of work offered which demonstrates that the approach of 'differentiation' has worked and worked well. The big industry picture is getting very compressed with most sub organisations now hanging around the Club Managers Association of Europe like a bad smell. I don't see this particular golf market looking for generic solutions and slow moving monopolies and that's exactly what happens when businesses centralise. This is a time for fast reactions, unique selling points, quick solutions and you need to be light on your feet for that. I don't understand the need to continually traverse the European continent just to hold hands and slap backs either – regardless of how many educational merit points it may generate. Added value with a sense of vanity perhaps.....it's all very confusing.

I was fortunate enough to play many exceptional courses this year. Hillside, North Berwick, The Dukes, Gullane all stand out but I have to say it was Formby which impressed me the most. Heathland golf courses always offer sublime golf settings. Abut them with a sensational links environment and it almost becomes too much to take in. Formby really is a beautiful setting and it was a pleasure to be in its surroundings. It's definitely a golf course which tests the full range of your golfing skills – thoroughly recommended.

On the radar, just like the geese we are hopefully heading North. Looking to play the Boat, Skibo, Royal Dornoch, Golspie, Reay, Durness then over to Askernish. What a fantastic and eclectic mix of golfing adventures. Photos and reports to follow.

### **Cryptic Corner.**

A few correspondents have been referring to my earlier 'Touching the Void' article. To answer the questions, the article did indeed have a dual meaning or 'mirror reference'. If you read the book or watch the film 'Touching the Void', then you will [hopefully] grasp the subject. But the story goes.....

two men climbing in the Andes. One falls off a ledge in bad weather and breaks a leg. He cannot recover himself back on to the mountain and is left dangling. His partner holds his weight for as long as he can. His own anchor is failing and he too is going to fall off the mountain. Within seconds to spare, he cuts the rope which sends his partner falling to his death – or so it seems. It's a fascinating story which asks so much of individual personalities and their willingness to survive. And yes, it is my impression of the golf industry right now.

#### **Bravery of the month award.....**

Goes to the SOL contractors who 'proudly' got their mug shots taken at Trumps new golf site at Aberdeen. This was a very brave act considering the enormous opposition concerned with the SSSI conversion. I hope their burning effigies don't dis-orientate all the helicopter pilots up there. If it was me guys, I would have sent some one else for that one!

#### **An 'oh no' moment.....**

Was hearing that those nice people at SKY have bought out the TV rights for the Masters. I guess that freeze on the BBC license fee was the nail in the coffin eh. Having just re-read John Feinstein's the Majors, it seems that the approach at Augusta seems to have 'drifted' somewhat. It's not that the golf commentary team at SKY do a bad job – quite the opposite. It's the cheap and tacky commercialism that goes with it. Not very Augusta like at all.

#### **And it's good night from...**

Alan MacGregor, General Manager of St Andrews Links Trust. Alan has to wear the shiny badge of Chief Executive now but he always struck me as a much more 'simpler' guy than all that. Being an ex-military man (like myself), I felt instantly comfortable with his forthright style of management coupled with his good old fashioned traits of sincerity, motivation and leadership.

The recession has hit St Andrews too proving even the almighty have to run the gauntlet now and again. Sadly, Alan's had to slash jobs of late and I would imagine that would have been a heavy burden for a genuine and transformational manager.

Too many people have been over critical and under intelligent on the Castle development – a project which Alan championed from the very start. This was a big piece in the Links Trust strategic jigsaw and it came quite awkward to fit in on a number of occasions. Like a man on a mission, Alan led from the front and achieved the objective. The Castle was probably his biggest achievement but in essence, the full panorama of golf operations at the Links trust has been enhanced significantly. Many will disagree but the links desperately needed change and modernisation. They got both measures - big time.

I would imagine that Alan will have a rather long gardening leave planned then he'll come back with gusto on the after dinner circuit and maybe throw in the odd consultancy for good measure.

Whatever he does, he can be rest assured that he made a very significant enhancement to Scottish golf.

**And Finally.....**

How sad it was to hear the very premature death of Eyemouth head green keeper Mark Pagan. Only thirty five years of age, Mark was as nice a guy you could ever want to meet. Dedicated to his profession, he led the line on many different occasions and always gave nothing but his best. Mark leaves a wife and young family who my deepest condolences go out to.