

R&A

Developing Golf.

Sharing best practice for the benefit of the sport

ISSUE
ten



Golf It!

An in-depth look at The R&A's
new family entertainment
destination in Scotland

“ It is always beneficial to bring the industry together and identify opportunities where resources can be shared to make a positive impact moving forward ”

– Neal Graham

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About Developing Golf magazine

Developing Golf magazine is a key element of the golf development alliance we wish to create with affiliates globally to share best practice. This alliance also includes a new R&A Portal, increased funding support and consulting with affiliates on the ground across the year to develop the strongest activation plans, supported by R&A-created global assets.

Phil Anderton, Chief Development Officer – The R&A



How **Golf It!** is making the sport more accessible, appealing and inclusive.

We take an in-depth look at The R&A's new community-based golf and entertainment facility in Glasgow

Since opening its doors in August 2023, Golf It! has been fulfilling the vision The R&A laid out when the brand was launched the year before.

That vision was to create a destination for golf that was accessible, appealing and inclusive, and the Glasgow-based facility, situated on the south bank of Hogganfield Loch, is showing just what that looks like in practice.



Russell Smith, General Manager at Golf It!, discusses the journey so far for the community-based golf and entertainment venue and the exciting plans for its future.

Sum up Golf It! for the uninitiated

RS: Golf It! is essentially the physical manifestation

of the main aims and objectives of The R&A, which is to make golf more affordable, accessible and inclusive. We've created a family entertainment destination in the heart of Scotland's biggest city.

There was a clear understanding of the importance of stimulating mass participation in golf, which was key to this idea that Martin Slumbers had many years ago now.

From the idea, Jenny Brown, Director of Business Development, lead on implementing the whole project before I joined to support, helping to secure the Lethamhill site, developing the brand and establishing commercial and community partnerships.

We didn't just want to create mass participation in the sport but also to change the perceptions of golf and break down some of those barriers to



The nine-hole course features five sets of tees

“ Nothing gives us more joy at Golf It! than to hear the place absolutely buzzing with noise ”

Golf It! facilities

- Nine-hole golf course
- Three adventure golf courses
- Park Golf pitch and putt
- Family putting green
- 55-bay floodlit double-decker Toptracer driving range
- Golf equipment library
- Three padel tennis courts
- Nature Trails
- Early Years Nursery
- Custom Fitting Studios
- Street Food Market



entry.

The key to changing perceptions is communication, so what Jenny did was brilliantly simple – she spoke to the audience we wanted to connect with and, working with a focus group, asked the people of Glasgow what they wanted from the facility.

The message that came back really strongly was the need to simplify the game, to make it faster, fun and generally more enjoyable, so we looked at things like adventure golf, pitch and putt and, obviously, a driving range. On top of that, there was a desire to see other activities offered, with padel tennis, street food and learning opportunities proving quite popular.

What we've created is something really quite special, and not just a place where we're putting a golf club in people's hands, but somewhere that is having a positive impact on the community we serve.

What are the metrics for defining success?

Creating a positive impact on the community is one aspect of it, and there are also commercial KPIs because in order to have that impact, we need the business to be profitable. As the governing body, the profit that's generated goes back into the facility, back into golf and back into those programmes we're delivering.

So the commercial success is of paramount importance, and for that we look at ways to drive footfall, which is the big one. In the first eight weeks in operation, we had 60,000 people through the building – our annual target is just over 200,000.

When it comes to social impact metrics, we look at things like how many people we can get to have a golf club in their hands and what type of audience we're attracting. Our core target audiences are families, time-starved golfers and lapsed golfers, and the products we've developed have been designed to engage them.

Now, you can only make the game inclusive and accessible if it's affordable, so the products are all very affordable too.

The other metrics in place focus on increasing participation in the Glasgow area and getting

Career opportunities abound

RS: A lot of the work we're doing in schools and with the Developing the Young Workforce initiative here in Scotland is aimed at cultivating that workforce of the future, and we're telling schools that, for us, it's not just about golf.

For example, you've got golf operations, which to us has a clear focus on customer service. Therefore, our venue is set up very similarly to a hospitality environment; our team of Trailblazers have their own section to look after in order to take care of our players.

In addition to that, you've got sales, marketing, finance-related jobs, the greenkeeping team and so much more, each area of our business can offer employment and career opportunities for people to pursue.

There are so many different sectors involved in the operation of a high-volume golf and entertainment venue, and that's the message we're leaving in schools, so it's not like you need to be good at golf or even know the first thing about it – there are plenty of opportunities. What we can promise is when you start working in golf, you're going to love it!

“Golf It! is essentially the physical manifestation of the main aims and objectives of The R&A”

**Golf It! in numbers
since opening**

60,000
players

2.2m
balls hit on the range

7,000
children playing golf in
schools



golf on to the curriculum. We have achieved the latter in part in year one. To date, we have worked with 7,000 children playing golf in schools, which will increase to 10,000 kids across 20 primary schools by the end of June 2024. The plan is that, in five years, we'll work with 42,500 school kids across Glasgow.

When we go to these schools, we leave the equipment there, and we have a programme to coach the teachers for them to continue these golf initiatives. The majority of these schools have set up golf clubs on the back of it, which we're really chuffed with.

How have you worked with community partners?

We've worked very closely with St Paul's Youth Forum, which is a youth and community group based in the north east of Glasgow. They do some amazing work and have pretty much eradicated gang violence from our area over the last 15 years.

We have employed lots of young people who have gone through youth programmes with St Paul's.

We're working with the Pantry in Ruchazie, who provided 250,000 meals for the community last year.

We asked, 'How can we help support you?', so what we're doing is building a community garden, and all the produce that is grown on site will then be gifted back into the community.

And we've got apprenticeship programmes running with our partners Toro, again giving young people in the area employment opportunities. There are also volunteer programmes and so much else besides.

I'm convinced that there is a little kid who is either on our education



“The majority of these schools have set up golf clubs on the back of it, which we're really chuffed with”

programme now or has been on it who has been given a golf club and will go on and do some amazing things.

So Golf It! is many things – it is a family entertainment destination, but it's got community right at the heart of it.

Is it important to offer people pathways from facilities like Golf It! to playing on-course golf?

Absolutely. People might not want to complete that pathway, but what we provide is an opportunity for those who do want to.

If you're a kid in the local area, the entry point is that we will offer golf to you in your school. The only membership that is available at Golf It! is an Experience Golf It! Membership and that is gifted to the kids that come through the education programme. On the back of that, they get free entry to park golf. That's the bridge to golf, and in park golf we use the same equipment as in schools – that's a plastic-headed club, an undersized tennis ball, a big footgolf hole and a huge flag – and it's nine holes. It's basically pitch and putt reimagined.

Once they get comfortable hitting the ball, we can then take the kids to play adventure golf, where we've created these three amazing, really immersive experiences that were actually designed by kids for families.

Then you can step them up to the driving range, and from there, once they're comfortable, there's the opportunity to get them on the golf course, where we have five sets of tees, including a par-3 position, which is signified by a big red star located in the fairway. That's always in an elevated position, so even if they don't make clean contact, there's momentum there to take the ball towards the green.

That's the pathway, and once they're on the course, they can start moving back through those five tee positions as and when they feel able.

What plans are on the agenda for Golf It! in 2024?

We've got lots of stuff planned for next year. We've got new partnerships kicking off and we've been really humbled by the support we've had from the Arnold and Winnie Palmer Foundation



'The place is buzzing with noise'

RS: Nothing gives us more joy at Golf It! than to hear the place absolutely buzzing with noise – it's incredible. We've created a really vibrant setting, and we want people to feel comfortable within that environment.

At some driving ranges and in some other golf settings it feels like you can't even talk, let alone have the kind of noise we have going on here. We have music playing and our Trailblazers, who are our staff, get to have their turn at putting on their playlist and it creates this fantastic buzz for everyone in the place.

Visit www.golf-it.com

– this is the first project they've provided funding for outside of the US.

We are creating a Bridge to Golf initiative to support the education programme, whereby we'll be identifying kids within primary schools that have a need to come into a coaching programme but might not be able to afford it. We'll provide free lessons for them twice a week.

We're located at Hogganfield Park, which is 100 years old next year, and that's an opportunity for us to activate the park in a completely different way. We want to celebrate the past and amplify the present, so there's lots of ideas around that, including potentially going back to the 1920s and introducing hickory golf on to the course.

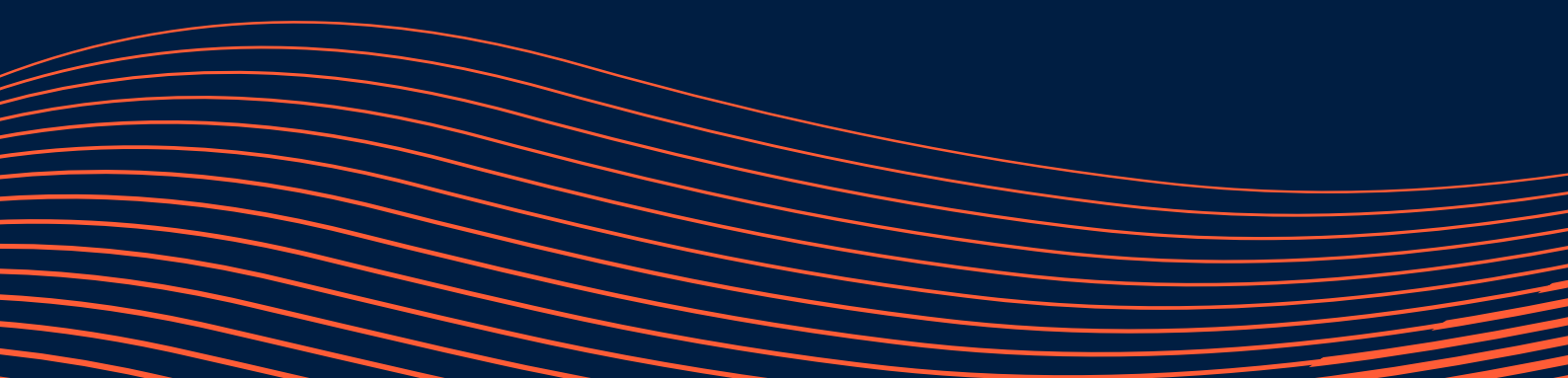
Our padel tennis courts will be in operation, and we'll start to welcome kids to our on-site nursery from February, and we're also going to be having a parkrun, starting in the spring, around Hogganfield Loch.

Then there's stuff like movie nights, which we'll be launching on Mondays, lots of Toptracer challenges, range takeovers from interesting brands – there's going to be so much going on. ●



Meet The R&A Team: Neal Graham.

The R&A's Golf Development Manager for the Middle East and India on his career journey and his desire to see a healthy golf ecosystem





Neal Graham thinks golf is getting cooler and he is excited about the opportunities presented by that.

From an idyllic first experience with the sport to the sharp end of golf operations at a prestigious Dubai resort and now on board at The R&A, it's been quite the journey so far.

What's your background?

I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and got into golf with my two older brothers and my Dad. We would play while on holiday in the west of Ireland on the sand dunes – that's where I learned to play golf.

Then I started playing at my local club and there was a strong junior section there, with quite a few of those juniors going on to become professionals.

I was all set to go to university and do business studies with French or German, but a new course had commenced which combined Business studies and golf through Kingston University and Merrist Wood College, so I pursued that.

To become a PGA professional, I went down the traditional route. So I was an assistant pro at Selsdon Park Hotel in Surrey, and then I moved up to Dalmahoy Hotel and Country Club in Edinburgh, which became a Marriott hotel, and passed my final PGA exams there.

I was a teaching professional, then the head professional and finally Director of Golf. I really enjoyed moving into operations and learning how everything worked within the department and the hotel itself. My experience working for Marriott provided me with the business acumen to progress further.

I'd been to Dubai several times to see the Desert Classic and I found the facilities, the weather and everything about it really appealing. I was fortunate to get the role of Director of Golf at Jumeirah Golf Estates (JGE) and our soft opening was the first Dubai World Championship, which is now the DP World Tour Championship.

I spent over eight years there, ending as General Manager, and I learned so much. I was fortunate to have many highlights at JGE, including the opening of the two courses, the European Tour Performance Institute and the main clubhouse as well as welcoming members and residents to the community.

A highlight was bringing Henrik Stenson on board as an ambassador and activating the contractual agreement.

I loved my time there, but I wanted to try something new. Following some consultancy

“The key message is that we are there to support and advise our affiliates and national golf associations”

“ I may be biased, but I think golf is becoming cooler ”



Neal's perfect winter weekend

In Dubai in the winter, it's nice to get out of the city, and there are lots of great places to go and visit. Going up in the mountains or in the wadis to get a bit of fresh air and do some hiking is the ideal winter escape. I like to get outside, catch up with friends and maybe fit a little bit of golf in there. I also like being on the water, so that would have to be included in there as well.

work I became a Director of 59club Middle East and Africa, a customer service data provider company servicing the golf and hospitality sectors. Then at the end of 2022, the opportunity to join The R&A came up.

That's my journey up to now – from Belfast, to London, to Edinburgh, and then to Dubai.

Describe your role

First and foremost, the priority is to work alongside our affiliates and national golf associations across the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Jordan, Lebanon, and India to understand their development plans and what opportunities lie ahead.

We appreciate that everybody is going to be at different points on their journey, so we're mindful of that, but it's also about identifying the common trends as well.

We can then utilise The R&A's resources to introduce programmes and initiatives to support those development plans where there is a will for that to happen.

The key message is that we are there to support and advise our affiliates and national golf associations – and that's everything from the grassroots all the way through to high

performance.

It's a collaborative approach focused not only on introducing people to the sport, but also on maintaining a level of engagement, as well as looking at ensuring the perception of golf is evolving.

In essence, what we want is to have a strong, healthy golf ecosystem where each part is helping the next and vice versa. In that way you create a snowball effect that leads to the growth of golf, increasing not only participation but also continued engagement.

What's the most satisfying part of your role?

It's seeing people enjoy the three key elements of what is essentially our proposition for golf:

The first one is a sense of connection, so they're either meeting new people or playing with friends and family.

Secondly, the sense of achievement – whether they have a quadruple bogey or a birdie.

Finally, it's about getting out there and enjoying the health and wellbeing benefits that come from playing golf, physically, mentally and socially.

An example that encapsulates all of that is The R&A Unleash Your Drive in Schools programme



Jordan Golf Federation clinic

we launched in collaboration with the Golf Foundation, where we saw children just enjoying golf with big smiles on all their faces, which was brilliant. That involved two workshops recently, in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where we were training PGA professionals who will then train schoolteachers to deliver a six-part programme within the school grounds.

It's something that's been successful in the UK and the idea is that the programme integrates nine mental toughness skills which have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the kids.

The schools then partner with clubs to create a pathway into junior development programmes.

I think it's important to celebrate the good work that the golf associations and the various stakeholders are undertaking to transform perceptions of the game. I may be biased, but I think golf is becoming cooler.

How would you assess the impact of off-course golf in increasing overall participation?

When we talk about improving the health of golf and increasing the strength of that wider ecosystem, we have to recognise the role that off-course facilities play in that. They are attracting audiences who wouldn't necessarily

be playing golf otherwise.

Facilities such as driving ranges with tracker-aided technology, simulator golf, adventure golf, mini golf, footgolf, or even the metaverse – these are all things that are drawing people into golf and attracting interest in the sport.

A lot of these types of facilities offer an experience that promotes engagement with golf but without the requirement to spend five hours on the course, or to have a membership, or to book a tee time.

Another thing we're seeing, particularly in the UAE, is the growth of on-site golf tuition at these facilities, so it's creating a pathway for people who want to take that next step.

And off-course facilities can help break down some of the barriers to playing on a course. For example, if you're playing in a simulator and you've got a club in your hand and you're hitting the ball well, you'll gain that confidence to say, 'I think I can have a go at playing on that course'.

With more people participating in off-course golf, there is a better chance there'll be more who transition to playing on-course golf. But if people don't want to make that transition, that's fine – they're still playing a form of golf and that's part of that healthy wider ecosystem. ●

The R&A Middle East Golf Leadership Forum.

Sharing experiences and identifying opportunities across the region





On the opening day of November's DP World Tour Championship at Jumeirah Golf Estates in Dubai, there was just as much action taking place off the course.

The venue also played host to The R&A Middle East Golf Leadership Forum, welcoming attendees from across the region and beyond.

They were there to discuss key industry topics and trends, with The R&A's Neal Graham lauding the event as a success.

"It was fantastic to host The R&A Middle East Golf Leadership Forum with my R&A colleagues Jackie Davidson and Lynn Wallace during the DP World Tour Championship," he said.

"The forum brought together key industry and non-industry stakeholders to listen and discuss three topical subjects currently in golf: golf and health, sustainability in golf, and inclusion in golf.

"Moderators and expert panellists for each

session shared experiences and opportunities that lie ahead for the golf industry in the UAE and the wider region."

Dr Andrew Murray, Chief Medical and Scientific Officer of the European Tour Group, was on hand to offer insight on the topic of golf and health; Chris Gray, The R&A's Head of Sustainability and Agronomy - Asia-Pacific, spoke on the issue of sustainability; while Tony Bennett, Head of Disability and Inclusion at the IGF, President of EDGA and PGA Master Professional, shed further light on the issue of inclusion.

The event was the first of its kind in the Middle East and Graham hopes it will feed the growing strength of the region's golf ecosystem.

"It is always beneficial to bring the industry together and identify opportunities where resources can be shared to make a positive impact moving forward," he added. ●

Main image: (L to R) Dr Andrew Murray, Dr Alan Kourie, Dr Anna Zickerman and Neal Graham
Above: (L to R) Neal Graham, Dr Alan Kourie and Dr Anna Zickerman on the Golf and Health Panel

R&A



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