



Durrant Durrant

Neil Durrant, courses manager of Dale Hill Hotel and Golf Club in Sussex, looks after not one, but two golf courses. *GreenKeeping* talks to him about the challenges involved, particularly resolving bunker drainage issues – and details the amazing story of what happened when he woke up one morning and found he was paralysed from the neck down

Located in the rural '1066 countryside' near Hastings, with breathtaking views across the ridges and valleys of High Weald, Dale Hill Hotel and Golf Club has two magnificent 18-hole golf courses: the Ian Woosnam course, which opened in 1997, and the Old Course, the original course at the venue. Both are uniquely positioned in over 350 acres of undulating hills and historic woodland with stunning panoramic views, and both have been designed to test amateur golfers while still being a challenge for professionals.

GreenKeeping caught up with the club's courses manager, Neil Durrant, to find out about him – and the work that goes into maintaining two large and attractive golf courses.

GreenKeeping: Please can you give a brief description of your path to greenkeeping. Where did you study, what educational route

did you follow, what qualifications do you have and how long have you now been at Dale Hill Golf Club?

Neil Durrant: On leaving school at 16 I got a job as a labourer on a building site, after about a year I thought this really isn't for me, then a friend of my mum's showed me an advert in the paper for a greenkeeper at The Ridge Golf Club in Maidstone. I thought to myself 'that is more what I would like to do': outside and fresh air, so I applied for the job and was lucky enough to get it.

I started there around August 1992 and completed a year and half of practical experience, I also started there around six to eight months before opening day so also managed to pick up some construction experience. In March 1994 I spoke to a greenkeeper from Dale Hill Golf Club who said there is a greenkeeping position going there, so I had an interview with the head greenkeeper at the time, Peter Goodsell, and

was lucky enough to get the job.

I spent three years working on the 'old course' and during that time went to Plumpton College, gaining my level two in greenkeeping. After two years in 1996 Dale Hill Golf Club decided to build another 18-hole golf course – designed by Ian Woosnam – which I was fortunate to have the chance to go and help with the construction of, and grow it in ready for opening in September 1997. In 1999 I went to Hadlow College to do my level three in greenkeeping. Also that year I became head greenkeeper of the Ian Woosnam course aged 24. Then, in 2015, I became courses manager. I have now been here 23 years and can honestly say I have never woke up and thought 'I don't want to go in today'.

GreenKeeping: There are two courses to maintain. How big is your team and how do you deploy and maximise the team resources



The par three 5th hole on the Ian Woosnam course

to ensure best maintenance for each course?
Neil Durrant: Currently we have a golf maintenance team of 14 and a half greens' staff, which includes one full-time fitter and a part-time fitter, so 13 greens' staff: me being the courses manager, a deputy courses manager, Peter Goodsell, and two first assistants who maintain the courses day by day – Daniel Bryant (Ian Woosnam course) and Adrian Gent (Old Course). Tyler Rook is our spray technician who looks after both courses. With the rest of our team we try and get them to work on both courses and learn

as much about both courses as possible so our team becomes a lot more versatile.

I have a dedicated team behind me who all work well together to get through a huge amount of work looking after two courses, the driving range, hotel gardens and so on.

GreenKeeping: What would you both say are the biggest challenges you currently face and how does this impact on the daily maintenance?

Neil Durrant: One of the biggest challenges is keeping the courses playable 365 days a year; we are a course on heavy clay soils surrounded by trees. So Dale Hill has invested heavily over the years on drainage including a huge investment in 2002 when we had a drainage system put in on all the fairways on the Ian Woosnam course and over the years have followed up with secondary drainage to pick up any acute areas.

The Old Course has traditional push-up greens which also is a challenge to keep them

open all year round as they were designed to hold water when built in 1973. Three years ago I thought 'how are we going to make these greens more playable in the winter without huge disruption?' I heard of a company called Ecosolve – I looked on their website and did some research on the Drill n' Fill machine, after speaking to Bretton King I was convinced this would help the push-up greens a lot; we now have done nine greens on the Old Course two years running and already there is a vast difference on how they are performing though the winter months.

Another big challenge which affects us all is the banning of chemicals chlorpyrifos and carbendazim. I am still not sure members and guests really understand yet the impact of these chemicals that are being banned, so communication still is key.

GreenKeeping: Five years ago you went to bed with flu symptoms and found the next morning you were paralysed from the neck

► Greenkeeper profile



The new 16th bunker, two years after its renovation

down. You subsequently learnt that you had been struck down with 'Acute Disseminated Encephalomyelitis' and had to spend a month in intensive care. How long has it taken you to recover, how are you now, how has the experience impacted on your life, family and friends, and what role does your work play in your rehabilitation and recovery?

Neil Durrant: Yes, in May 2013 I was struck down with a rare viral infection of the brain and spinal cord. I spent three months in hospital paralysed from the neck down unable to talk, eat and struggled to see.

After three months of speech therapy, learning to eat again, daily physio and working hard on my core strength, I eventually was able to sit in a wheelchair. After convincing the doctors I was all right they eventually let me go home to be with my wife Lisa and my children Finley, three, and my new born child Phoebe, as my wife was eight and a half months'

pregnant when this happened to us.

After nine months at home, lots of physio and hard work between my mum and Lisa, they brought me into work, where my work colleagues put me in a golf buggy and off I went around the course – a real milestone after where I was 10 months earlier. After a few more months the physio said I can apply to get my car licence back. I went for a driving test and passed – even though I couldn't walk very well I could drive fine, so the next day after passing my car test I came to work and have never looked back! Four years later I still can't walk great but I am improving year on year and have always been very positive for my future.

Obviously it has had a massive impact on my family life as I have two small children but they both realise my limitations at the moment and, as kids, they both adapt very well. I am very lucky it never affected my character – just me physically.

As for Dale Hill, they have played a massive role in my rehabilitation and recovery, from supporting me with everything in need to David Collier, the director of Leaderboard, coming to the hospital to see me, which at the time was a massive comfort to me and my family.

GreenKeeping: You mentioned you had changed your aeration process. What were the reasons, how does the new programme differ, what were you looking to achieve and what outcomes have you seen to date?

Neil Durrant: Over the past 10 years or so we have had two greens' maintenance weeks, one in March / April and one in August / September. In March we used to hollow core greens 12 to 15mm diameter tines, deep fill with sand two to three inches and then sand injection with the Graden in August 20mm deep using 2mm blades, but, as the weather recently has changed in 2015 and 2016 the hollow coring didn't seem to grow in until around middle of May as the springs were so cold we had no growth. It took around eight or more weeks to recover back to a decent putting surface – which didn't go down well with most members and guests.

So in 2017 I decided to do both operations in one week per course in August – hollow core with 10mm tines and sand injection Graden with around 30 tonnes of sand per course and straight behind topped up with around 20 tonnes of sand; a massive task to do as we have 38 greens here.

The benefits for the members and guests is that there is only one week per course of disruption in the year and not doing any major disruption in March meant we had a really good and positive start to the year rather than 'we just come out of the winter now there digging up the greens'.

For the greens' staff we work really hard for two weeks but it is only once a year and as we are completing this task in August the weather is generally dryer so cleaning up is much easier; there is no significant outcome we have seen to date but I do know I am removing a lot of organic matter just before the autumn winter sets in.



The 16th hole on the Ian Woosnam course, with a completed bunker

“AFTER THREE MONTHS OF SPEECH THERAPY, LEARNING TO EAT AGAIN, DAILY PHYSIO AND WORKING HARD ON MY CORE STRENGTH, I EVENTUALLY WAS ABLE TO SIT IN A WHEELCHAIR”

GreenKeeping: You are running a bunker renovation project. Please can you explain exactly what problems were being experienced and how this was impacting on playability and maintenance of the course?

Neil Durrant: The problems we are experiencing are that when we have around 20mm of rain in a night the bunkers are washing out and flooding. We have 82 bunkers here on both courses and regular maintenance is proving difficult, so we needed something that is more maintenance friendly, obviously after 20mm of rain the impact on golf was huge, as we have a lot of G.U.R. the next morning. From a maintenance standpoint it would take us a long time to pump the water out from the bunker and we'd leave it almost for a day to dry out and then spend a lot of time and hard work to pushing back up steep faces.

GreenKeeping: In order to alleviate the problem, how did you go about identifying remedies, what criteria did you use to appraise and which product did you select to move ahead with for the programme?

Neil Durrant: Well, we have two problems with the bunkers:

1. The faces are steep and when we had a lot of rain they washed out and exposed the clay base and the silt from the base contaminated the sand.

2. After heavy rain the drainage was blocked up with sand and silt and the bunkers were flooding. So to tackle the issue with washout I looked into revetting the bunker

walls – so lowering the steep faces and having a revetted edge would stop a lot of washout and keep the sand cleaner from silt after heavy rain, hence prolonging the life of the sand. So I got hold of a company called EcoBunker, I then had a long chat with Richard Allen who came down and explained all the benefits to having synthetic turf edging and very quickly this was the look and practicalities I was looking for, so I arranged for Richard and his team to come down and install the synthetic edging in three of our bunkers.

The second problem was to solve the issue of the bunkers flooding, how to stop the drainage in the bunker from getting blocked up with sand and silt after a few years. I was talking to someone one day and they happened to mention a product called Capillary Concrete which straight away interested me, so I looked online and I came across a company named Boarder Sports. I then spoke to Neil Thompson who was very helpful and talked to me about how the product works and how it allows the water through yet keeps the drainage clean from sand and silt which I was very impressed with. I arranged for Neil to come down and install the Capillary Concrete in the three bunkers we had done with the new synthetic edging.

GreenKeeping: In terms of the installation, you and the team have done this. How easy was Capillary Concrete to install, what initial tutorial was given and how long did it take to complete each bunker?

Neil Durrant: What impressed me about

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Capillary Concrete is that you can buy the material and if for some reason on that day you find you can't do it, you can just leave it until you can. Neil Thompson from Border Sports came down and with three of our guys installed our three bunkers. To be honest, to install the Capillary Concrete base is fairly easy – the trick is to get the right consistency with the mix but once you have done a bunker or two you can quickly see what is right or wrong. Once set up it took us around two hours to complete a bunker base of around 50 square metres.

After finishing these bunkers Neil went away and was more than happy that we were competent enough to continue installing more bunkers.

GreenKeeping: What have you found to be the major benefits of using Capillary Concrete, how has it improved the problems you were facing and what recommendations would you make of this product?

Neil Durrant: There are three benefits we now have with capillary concrete:

1. **No weeding around the edges,** which saves time and the weeds around the edges of the bunkers always looks untidy.

2. **No washouts.** This saves a huge amount of time not having to constantly push up sand back up the face and also keeps the sand cleaner from silt

3. **The bunkers now never flood.** This is the main advantage, since we have done our 16th bunker, which always flooded

because of where it is situated. In two years and two winters it has never flooded, once even after 37mm of rain in one night. It still amazes me that I drive to work in the morning going through massive puddles and floods and I get to work, look at the 16th bunker and I can rake it that morning!

GreenKeeping: How many bunkers do you intend to renovate and over what period of time. Are there any new bunker related products that you are using in conjunction with Capillary Concrete that you are particularly impressed with?

Neil Durrant: We are planning to complete around six to eight bunkers a year depending on size, we are looking to complete all our greenside bunkers which is around 50. So a long term plan, but we have done 11 already. I feel EcoBunker and Capillary Concrete work well together as you have an edge and a base which fit nicely together and both products tick a lot of boxes.

GreenKeeping: What machinery fleet are you currently using, are there any pieces that you are impressed with or make life a good deal easier at this time of year?

Neil Durrant: 4 x Toro Greensmasters 3420 with greens and tees units.

- 1 x Baroness GM2800 rough mower.
- 2 x Baroness LM2700 fairway mowers.
- 1 x Baroness GM1700 banks mower.
- 1 x Toro Groundsmaster 3500d rotary semi rough mower.

- 1 x Toro Reelmaster 3100d semi rough mower.
- 1 x John Deere 2653 semi rough mower.
- 2 x Baroness bunker rakes.
- 2 x True-Surface rollers.
- 1 x ProCore 864 tiner.
- 1 x John Deere HD200 Pro Gater sprayer.
- 1 x Wiedenmann Vertidrain.
- 3 x John Deere 455 compact tractors
- 1 x John Deere 4410 tractor
- 1 x TYM T503 tractor
- 1 x John Deere 5510 tractor with foreloader.
- 5 x John Deere Gators.
- 1 x Toro Workman.
- 1 x Toro Pro Force blower.
- 1 x digger.

That is the main core of our equipment and to be honest all of the machinery impresses me now; it is amazing how all of the machines have moved on in the last 25 years.

GreenKeeping: What feed programme are you operating annually, what products are you using and how are the courses looking as a result?

Neil Durrant: I like to keep my feed programme fairly simple. Weather dependant I start off the year with a 6.6.12 micro granular to get things started, followed by a few weeks later with a base feed of 10.0.10 micro granular then onto liquid feeds which I spray every two weeks.

Starting with 40 litres of 15:0:12 Prestige liquid N.P.K with 10 litres of seaweed from Sea Nymph, 2.5kg Acti fe iron and 10 litres of Phos-Form per hectare every two weeks. The rate of N.P.K changes slightly depending on how the greens are performing, Also we monthly spray Revolution. During the winter months I spray a Headland product 20-20-30 Turfite, Liquid Turf Hardener and Seamac Pro Turf or equivalent. The greens on both courses benefit from spaying liquids every other week to keep the growth more consistent and to avoid big peaks and troughs.

GreenKeeping: What do you think are the strengths that have carried you through your career at Dale Hill Golf Club and how do you keep the course evolving?

Neil Durrant: I believe my work ethic is my

strongest attribute. The job involves early starts and working in all weathers, I am prepared to do any job I would ask the guys to do. I also have a genuine passion for golf. I play as often as I can at Dale Hill and other clubs. Keeping the course evolving is very important. I have a clear plan in place daily, weekly, monthly and yearly, I invest time looking into new technologies and attending seminars and conferences.

GreenKeeping: What height of cut do you use across the course?

Neil Durrant: In the summer the greens are cut at 3mm every other day and rolled every other day for both courses, the tees, collars and aprons are cut at 11mm three times a week, the fairways are cut at 13mm three times a week on the Ian Woosnam course and two times a week on the Old course.

The semi rough is cut three times a week around the fairways and the tee banks are cut once a week at 30mm and the rough is cut once a week at 2.5 inches on both courses.

This takes around 215 man hours weekly depending on weather and how busy the courses are. In the winter, greens are cut at 4 to 5mm depending on weather and cut once or twice a week, all other areas stay the same height of cut and are cut when needed.

GreenKeeping: Communication is the key to success. How often do you communicate and how do you work to ensure you both deliver the best for the members and players?

Neil Durrant: I compose a members' newsletter monthly, we have monthly captains' meetings, monthly general manager meetings and course drives, and we have quarterly greenkeepers' meetings as well as monthly



The final stage of Cappillary Concrete being laid (and below)



► Greenkeeper profile

greenkeepers' health and safety meetings.

GreenKeeping: The pressures on the course manager to deliver a better product are growing year on year and the level of professionalism is rising with this. What do you think are the qualities now needed to meet the requirements and demands of golfers by someone in your position and how does this help contribute to the business of golf?

Neil Durrant: Communication, communication, communication; I spend a lot of my time communicating to members, management and staff and so on.

I think the biggest frustration for members and guests is not knowing why. Why have they done that now? Why have they taken that tee out of play? Why are there so many worm casts around this year and not last? The majority of people understand once things are explained and people are more on your, and the golf club's, side once things have been explained.

GreenKeeping: What gives you the greatest satisfaction from your job?

Neil Durrant: I get great satisfaction out of seeing both courses prepared to the highest standard with our members and guests enjoying their golf. I feel the biggest achievement to date is holding two Euro Pro Tours here at Dale Hill and having a massive sense of pride for me and the team when I was hearing the professionals saying how much they enjoyed playing the course and the greens.

GreenKeeping: With your experience, what advice would you give to youngsters starting out and wanting to pursue a career in the profession?

Neil Durrant: Greenkeeping is hard work but very rewarding, there is a lot to learn (I am still learning 25 years later) but don't be afraid to ask lots of questions and pick up as much information as possible.

When you complete any task look back and think to yourself "am I happy with that? Is that the best I can do?" Someone told me that when I was 17 and I still do that today, every day.



Courses manager Neil Durrant

GreenKeeping: What changes do you think need to be made to benefit the industry sector and profession of the greenkeeper?

Neil Durrant: I believe as a sector we need to continue to promote the fact that greenkeeping is a very skilled job, it takes many skills to be a good greenkeeper. I think there

needs to be more seminars held for general managers, committee members and so on with their course managers to get more of an understanding of the challenges we all face. I have spoken to lots of head greenkeepers and course managers over the years and we all face similar problems.