

The One percent club

First Links

Coaches understand the philosophy of aiming for repeated small gains that together make for a major leap forward. Can the same apply to golf courses, asks Adam Lawrence?

Sir David Brailsford, the boss of British cycling, and the man behind an unprecedented flood of Summer Olympic gold medals in both the Beijing and London velodromes, not to mention Bradley Wiggins' Tour de France victory, has a simple philosophy. "If you take everything you do, and improve it by one percent, that adds up to a big improvement in performance," he says.

It's a mindset that managers in many businesses could do with adopting, golf included. It isn't hard for bright, engaged people to work out small improvements in tasks they handle day in and day out. If minor changes can reduce maintenance budgets (or improve the standard of course presentation for the same money), or produce a small increase in the average spend of each golfer in the pro shop or clubhouse, or whatever, the result will be a more efficient operation. Perhaps equally importantly, a staff

that understands just how closely their efforts correlate to the overall performance of the golf course.

A similar mindset can be applied to course development. In the 1930s, legendary architect AW Tillinghast was hired by the PGA of America to tour the country, visiting courses and providing them with free advice on how to keep their operations running during the worst of the Great Depression. There are many courses still around today that owe their survival through the Thirties to this work.

Now, in conjunction with ASGCA, the PGA is funding a similar program for courses in today's golf market that feel the need to improve, but don't necessarily have a lot of cash. The First Links program provides funding for ASGCA member architects to visit clubs and produce reports highlighting ways in which the course could be improved through changes in course design. And clubs are starting





Battenkill CC has a successful junior development program

to see the benefits of what is, to them, free consultancy.

Battenkill CC, in Greenwich, NY, is one of the first clubs to engage with the First Links program. Architect Lester George, ASGCA, who visited Battenkill, and produced a report highlighting ways in which the historic nine hole course could create practice and short game facilities that would help attract new players, says: "It's one of the most charming golf courses I have ever visited. They have a long history of being a small town club, and they should embrace that image. They are the epitome of what more clubs need to strive to be: uncomplicated, dedicated to member enjoyment, simple necessities, community friends and remarkably sustainable."

Battenkill professional Bill Wigand has a children's program with around 20 youngsters regularly participating. The tight nature of the property means his classes have little space to practice.

During his clinics, Wigand uses the putting green and the fairway and green of the opening hole for chipping and putting practice. When members want to play the hole, Wigand moves the kids aside.

George's report identifies a way around this problem. By shortening the opening hole, using a defunct chipping green and an unused plot of land near the ninth tee, a short game area of around 30,000 sq ft could be created. "Our course sits in a bowl surrounded by hills, a train track, and the Battenkill river. Most of this flood plain is occupied by the course, but there are pockets of land that are not in play we thought could be developed for practice and teaching facilities, but that were not so clearly suited to the task that it was obvious how to do so," says David Harshbarger, a member of Battenkill's green committee, and one of the key movers behind the project.

"Lester recommended against using a section of the property we thought could have been repurposed as a driving range or short game facility. He reasoned that the area was too far from the clubhouse to expect that it would get meaningful use, even if the space would accommodate the needs. More generally, he was very attuned to the role our facility plays in our community. We are not a championship course. We attract higher handicap and less experienced players, both as members and guests. Lester pointed out numerous areas where we could make improvements to the course, such as piping streams underground, adding tees, or avoiding native areas or additional water features, that would continue to make the course attractive to our demographic. Finally, Battenkill is a Golden Age course, originally laid out in 1925, and has relatively well-preserved features consistent with



Battenkill CC looks to welcome more beginners with the help of Lester George, ASGCA

courses of that era. Lester encouraged us to consider highlighting those features, for example by recapturing geometric greens by extending our oval greens out to the edges of their rectangular pushed-up green pads. He suggested that by doing so, we could better define our course in our market, and give it character and additional interest.”

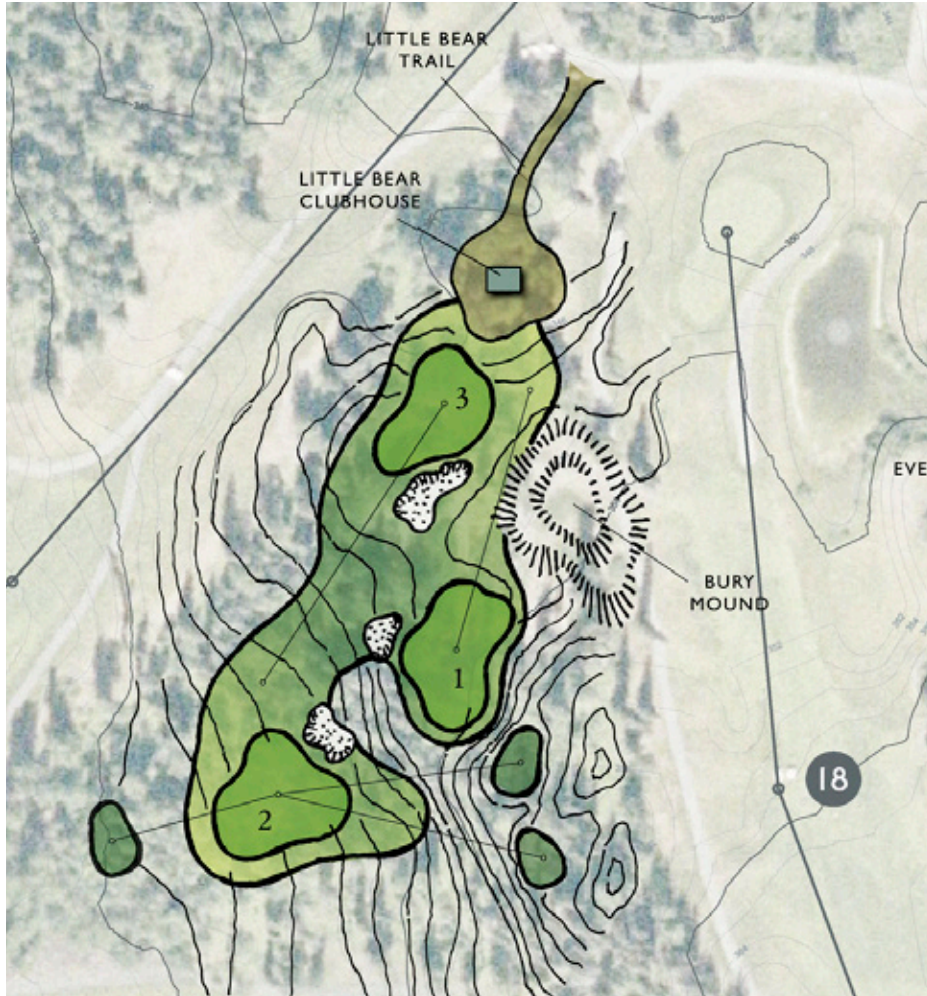
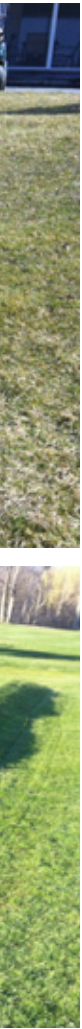
Harshbarger says the club is now figuring out how to put George’s recommendations into place. “In the vein of small improvements over time adding up to big improvements, we are first looking at things we can do

in-house, such as expanding teeing grounds or expanding greens out to the edges of the green pads,” he says. “We have considered moving forward with a capital improvement fund, and if we can bite that off in addition to addressing a number of pressing operations needs, we will. We feel through First Links we were able to see new opportunities to extend access to golf for our members and beginners within our community. As long as we can continue to attract and encourage golfers to enjoy and improve at the game, regardless of current skill level,

we will remain viable and relevant in our community.”

In Jacksonville, Fla., is another example of the First Links program helping golf operators find new solutions for their operational issues. A large, national developer bought the Desmond Muirhead-designed Baymeadows Golf Club in 2005, with the intention of closing it and redeveloping the land for housing. This plan fell through, partly because of the economic situation, and partly because of the objections of existing homeowners on the property.

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At Anchorage GC, a new junior facility could be made possible by First Links and Forrest Richardson, ASGCA

planned as a designated youth area to introduce young players to the game.

Anchorage has a successful chapter of the nationwide First Tee organization, but one of its key facilities, a nine hole course known as Russian Jack, is the subject of potential redevelopment plans. The chapter, therefore, is interested in moving its operations to Anchorage GC, if a suitable facility can be provided.

Architect Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, visited Anchorage under the First Links program to investigate the club's options. His report suggests a plan for the Little Bear space incorporating three greens, with fairway, rough and surrounds connecting the area. The plan calls for the area to be cleared from dense forest with stands of trees left in place to form buffers between the greens. These stands will define fairways and holes that will be flexible in terms of set-up and configuration.

The challenge for the club is to finance the construction. The First Tee of Alaska is investigating the option of having much of the rough construction work carried out by local contractors as a donation to the organization, with the fine work then being carried out under Richardson's supervision, provided pro bono. ●

Now, partly thanks to First Links, there may be another solution. Tom Burnett, who owns a nearby golf academy, is in negotiations with the developer about taking over 25 acres of the former course and relocating his academy there, with the possibility of reopening nine holes at a later date.

Architect Scot Sherman, ASGCA, visited the facility to advise Burnett on the options. "Because of its size and existing lighting, I recommended that the main tee near the clubhouse site should be open to the public as a day and night range for ongoing revenue," says Sherman. "In addition to long game practice, there is ample space to construct multiple short game areas for both academy students and the general public. The area of the abandoned eighteenth green could become the 'Village Green' in the spirit of the

Himalayas in St Andrews or the new Thistle Dhu putting course in Pinehurst. This area would be open to all residents. Finally, to take full advantage of the site, there is space to also use the constructed practice features as a nine hole par three course. Given its proximity to many households, major transportation routes, and warm weather climate, I expect this facility will enjoy a sustainable future in every sense. Our business needs a comeback story and I look forward to the opportunity to assist."

At the other end of the US, in Anchorage, Alaska, player development is at the heart of another First Links project. In 2011, the Anchorage Golf Club completed a masterplan that included several areas for practice, player development and bringing youth into golf. Among the areas was the Little Bear facility, a two acre site

FIRST LINKS

Funding for First Links comes from the PGA of America, and the program is administered by the ASGCA Foundation. Grants are available to golf course owners or operators interested in reconfiguring their layouts, or devoting open land to smaller-scale facilities, helping new players to ease into the game. First Links grants enable applicants to pay for visits by ASGCA members to evaluate potential short courses, practice facilities or other modifications making the course more appealing to new players. ASGCA member consultants will follow up their visits with a site evaluation report describing their ideas.

Apply for a grant by visiting <http://asgca.org/first-links>, or email aileen@asgca.org.