

Friday's Local Hero

Happy families at Scotland's new golf course, discovers **Richard Winton**



WEIGHTY splodges of rain begin to fall as Robert Arkley ambles on to the first tee. From the ninth fairway, one of the 100 founder members of Kingsfield Golf Centre, a course only opened in April, hollers "hello" and a greenkeeper hurriedly manoeuvres his buggy to escape an errant drive.

The informality and candour are immediately apparent; the air refreshingly clear of the whiff of superiority that can so often pollute a golf club. It is how Arkley always envisioned it to be during several years of drink-fuelled discussions and early morning musing working this patch of land in Linlithgow when it was just the family farm.

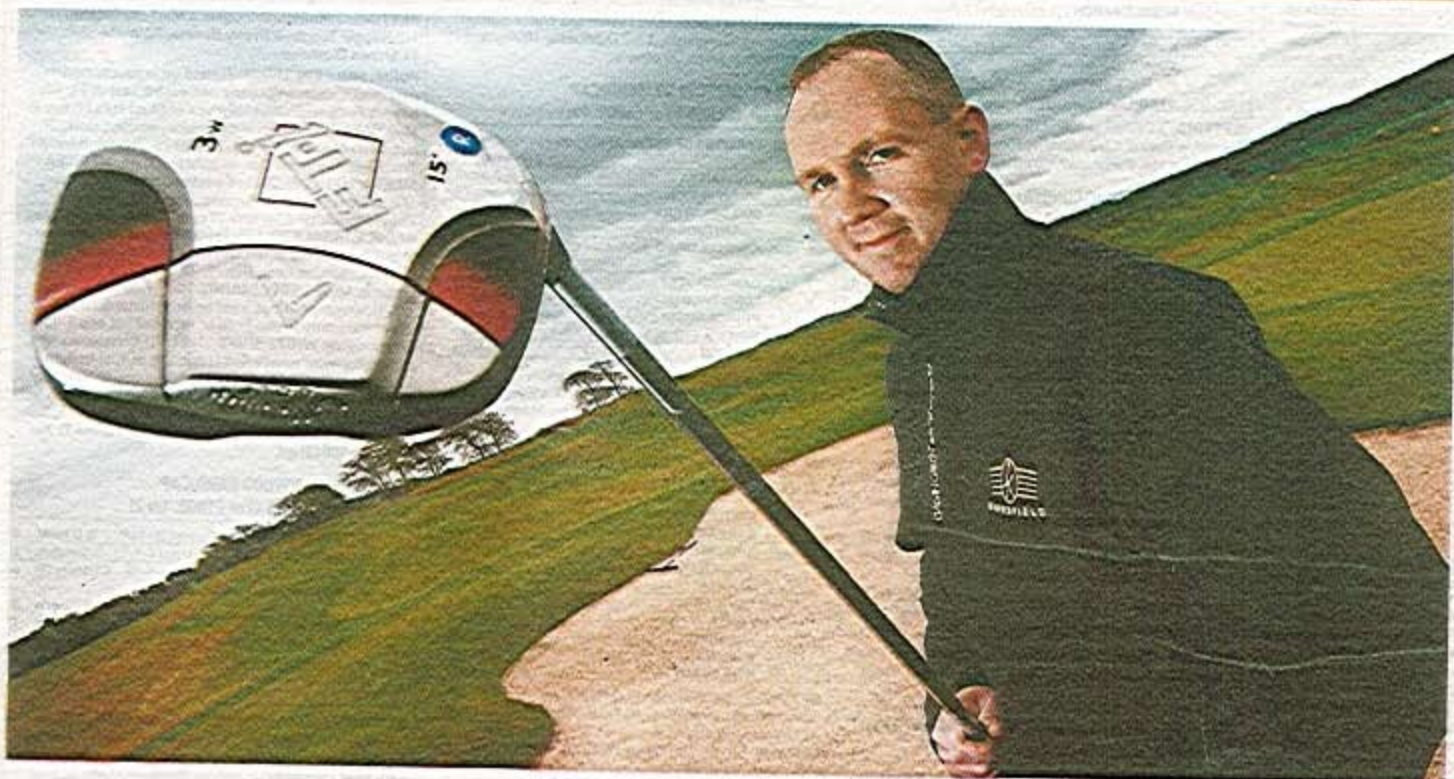
"It's about young people and families getting access to golf," the managing director explains, tending the flag on the first green.

"In traditional clubs, dad is away on a Saturday for five hours then maybe he'll have a pint but this is different. Maybe it's mum's idea. Her and the kids can go putting while dad plays nine holes. It's all about family and I think that is something that is more important to everyone these days."

It was ever thus for Arkley. Four generations of his kin had toiled on this site but, with seasonal farming becoming less viable, he took the opportunity to oversee a farm diversification project that encompassed the creation of a driving range amid the arable fields. That was in 1995 and as his parents continually complemented the range with the addition of a cafe, putting green and tuition while he tended the land it became increasingly clear that an opportunity was arising.

"The defining moment was one day when some friends and I decided to go on a tour of all the ranges in a 100-mile radius," Arkley explains, plodding into sheeting rain down the second. "I had a look around and realised how good ours was and how much potential there was. We had no end of ideas but I didn't know if what I wanted even existed or if it was achievable, because we set such high standards."

Around 18 months of discussion



DOWN TO EARTH: Robert Arkley is keen to adopt an informal approach to his set-up at Kingsfield Golf Club in West Lothian. Picture: Richard Scott

gave him his answer and, ultimately a splendid nine-hole test that opened to the public last month. "Some people might see it as a bit Mickey Mouse because it's only nine but I think anyone playing it would say it's a proper golf course," he adds pointedly, having located yet another wayward skelp buried in knee-high grass.

Despite being designed to USGA specification, with circular tees and vast, links-style greens possessing the propensity to embarrass even the several Scottish professionals who use the club as a base, it is open enough – in every way – to be enjoyed by beginners. But not by Arkley himself, whose confession that he has never hit a ball on any course nor has been tempted to, is franked by his hopeless attempts to offer a yardage for a blind approach shot to the fourth green.

So how can a man with such apathy towards the sport, live a life dominated by it? "I love sports and watching them but I just don't see myself taking up golf. I'm not ruling it out but I realise the heartache people get trying to master the game and the misery, so I'm quite happy to just enjoy watching guys I know do well," insists the former Linlithgow Rugby Club back row,

noting the exasperated face of right-hand man David Mitchell as his putt lips out.

Mitchell is the strategist of the operation; the brake on Arkley's instinctive, reactive nature, not to mention a useful golfer. While the younger man is out at 7am on a Sunday cutting fairways and not retiring to his home alongside the course until late into the evening when the range is cleared up, Mitchell is the one trying to implement structures that enable the managing director to do the work of just two men rather than four.

An advocate of using golf as a vehicle to teach youngsters the values of self-policing, he is also charged with developing relationships with the council and other bodies and has taken it upon

himself to strengthen ties with other clubs in the area to share equipment and ideas for the benefit of the local tourist industry.

Kingsfield, it becomes clear, is more than just a golf club. "Community is central to what we do," Arkley explains, making his way down the seventh towards the far corner of the 150-acre site. "That's why we only have 100 founder members so the course is almost all pay-as-you-play because we want to make golf more accessible."

Just behind the green – along with a poor second shot – lies a sliver of land earmarked for a par-3 course that would allow youngsters a chance to learn the game and, in the hills behind, Arkley points out the home of Stephen Gallacher, the European Tour professional and a good friend of both his and the club. The plan, he reveals, is for a foundation to be established for kids who would normally have no access to golf run by one of the country's leading players to complement the high-quality coaching already available from the likes of Adam Hunter, Mark King and Jane Connachan.

That is a consideration for another day but Arkley is the type of man who wants everything to

happen yesterday – something he freely confesses en route to the ninth, appropriately named "Aspire".

"Everything for me is forward, forward, what's next, what can I do now, where can we go," he says, gazing out from the highest part of the course at the state-of-the-art coaching bays, sweeping round to the short-game area, putting green and events base of the business offering archery and falconry, and then at Linlithgow Palace in the distance. "The course is not even close to the finished article. I don't think it will ever be for me."

"It sounds silly but it was a bit of an anti-climax opening the course because there was so much build-up to it but I'm still making excuses and striving for more quality because I know it's not right," Arkley adds, now nursing a strawberry milkshake in the cafe. "Part of the problem is the emotional attachment I have to it. Addiction is probably the wrong word but it's not healthy and I need to get back some kind of balance."

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