

Glasgow facility to the fore in push to become hub for disabled golfers

NICK RODGER

THERE have been many pearls of wisdom spouted about golf down the years. "Just give it up," remains a sage piece of advice, for instance, that this hapless correspondent simply refuses to heed despite the vast accumulation of incriminating evidence.

What was it Arnold Palmer said about this teasing, tormenting, flummoxing and occasionally fulfilling game again? "Success in golf depends less on strength of body, more on strength of mind and character."

That is very much the case for golfers with a disability.

"We've got people here on wheelchairs, there's someone paralysed down one side and a young lad with no fingers who can still swing a club and they're all being taught by me, a blind guy," said Barry McCluskey, the visually impaired golf development supervisor at the Golf It! facility in Glasgow.

Since the R&A bought the decaying Lethamhill municipal course, where Golf It! now sits, the site has enjoyed the kind of expensive and extensive facelift that used to be the reserve of an ageing Hollywood dame.

As it continues to welcome people from all walks of golfing life into its inclusive, high-tech, come-all-ye embrace, the facility is driving towards becoming a hub for disabled golfers in Scotland.

Last week, it took delivery of a Paragolf buggy, an adaptive contraption devised to lift and support wheelchair users so they can take to the course and enjoy their golf like everybody else.

For Ellie Robertson, a maiden outing on said cart was an emotional ride.

"It was quite daunting, in fact it was quite scary," admitted the 20-year-old, who suffered a spinal cord lesion during heart surgery as a two-year-old. "I didn't think it would be able to support me. I spend my life at sitting level. Suddenly I was standing up. I always thought golf was a game I couldn't play. But I'm loving it."



Wheelchair tennis player Ellie Robertson is making progress as a golfer

Pictures: Jacob Chan

Robertson's disability has certainly not been a barrier to her sporting endeavours and excellence. The Bargeddie youngster is a leading campaigner on the ITF Wheelchair Tennis Tour and her competitive fires are also being stoked by this different ball game.

Introduced to golf at last year's Open by Mark Taylor, the head of development at EDGA (European Disabled Golf Association), Robertson has been taken under the wing of Golf It! head pro Alyson Mckechnie.

The aim is to nurture Robertson's skills and fast-track her into an official EDGA event. It is a bit like a golfing X-Factor process, but without Simon Cowell's sighing, withering condemnations.

"She's on a journey with us and the Paragolf device opens up a whole new world," said Mckechnie of the all-terrain cart that was donated by The R&A Foundation.

"It allows her to be in a standing

position, it gives her a bigger range of motion and, generally, it will enhance her overall performance.

"What's so powerful about the machine is that it gets a wheelchair user up to eye-level again with others. For some, that could be the first time they have experienced that. The impact of someone speaking to you at that level, as opposed to looking down at you, is huge.

"We are providing an opportunity for everyone to play with no barriers. Having Barry [McCluskey] here has been very important for us.

"We've gone out to visually-impaired schools and the feedback from the kids was that they didn't realise golf was an option for them. After listening to Barry, his story, where he's been in the world and what's he's achieved in golf, it's really inspired them."

McCluskey admits he is working in his "dream job". As one of the world's leading visually impaired players,

McCluskey, the son of the former Celtic striker, George, continues to revel in his day-to-day golfing duties. It is a case of go for it at Golf It!

"Golf can open doors for anybody, no matter your ability or disability," he said. "Since I lost my sight, I've always had people saying, 'You can't do this, or you can't do that'. But I'm a stubborn person. I like to prove people wrong.

"I've worked closely with Mark at EDGA to make sure that all the coaches here are ready to deal with anyone who comes through the door. They may be thinking, 'I want to try golf, but I've got such and such'. But we have coaches who can help."

McCluskey is certainly enjoying being part of Robertson's development. As for tennis-playing Robertson herself? Well, she is hoping to be a smash hit too on the golf course.

"I'm a competitor so this golf journey is something I'll really get my teeth into," she smiled.

a little bit scruffy down the last. But yeah, to see that putt go in felt amazing. Just so happy to win."

Hatton drew level with a birdie on the second but found himself behind again when he drove into a bunker at the next. Hatton leapfrogged his playing partner at the fifth, making a gain from four feet as Hillier bogeyed after a duffed chip, and was not to be knocked off the top of the leaderboard from that point.

After a tense back nine, the decisive moment came when Hatton hit a brilliant wedge approach to the 16th that set up a tap-in birdie to send him two shots clear.

There was still time for a few jitters on the 18th, where Hatton's

conservative approach saw him leave a five-footer for par, which Hillier piled pressure on by making a nine-footer for birdie before his opponent converted to avoid a play-off.

Rory McIlroy saved his best for last as a 66 took him to 12 under for the week, with his tied-fourth finish representing his 11th consecutive top-10 in this event, a run stretching back to his victory in 2009.

Ewen Ferguson who had been on top of the leaderboard after the second round and was third going into the last round, had another difficult day with a 75 leaving him on 17 under, in 16th place, with Robert MacIntyre and Calum Hill just a shot behind.

Digest

CRICKET

HEATHER KNIGHT says England must take hope from their miraculous comeback in 2023 as they bid to keep the women's Ashes alive with victory in the opening T20 in Sydney today.

England go into the game trailing 6-0 on the points table after Australia completed an ODI whitewash with an 86-run win in Hobart on Friday. But captain Knight has not lost all hope and pointed out her side's recovery from a similar deficit two years ago to eventually tie the series 8-8.

"What we learned from that 2023 Ashes series when we were in exactly the same position was to be really focused on what we had to do in the moment. There's no doubt it is going to be tough but we will try and bring our best to the T20 and I think the format change will suit us well," she said.

CURLING

SCOTTISH champion Ross Whyte and his team claimed their first Grand Slam title following a sensational finish to last night's Masters final in Guelph, Ontario.

Whyte's squad lost last season's Masters final by a shot, but this time another tight contest went their way as they pipped former Olympic gold medalist Brad Jacobs and his Calgary rink 5-4.

Despite trailing 3-1 after five ends, the Scots drew level at the sixth and then forced their opponents to settle for a single shot at the seventh. That gave skip Whyte the advantage of delivering the final stone at the last end, and he used the hammer perfectly to score the two shots required to clinch victory. It was their sixth straight win in Guelph after losing their opening match of the tournament last Tuesday.

RACING

PROTEKTORAT soared over the Windsor fences to record a brilliant victory in the Fitzdares Fleur De Lys Chase.

Dan Skelton's 10-year-old – co-owned by Sir Alex Ferguson, along with John Hales and his daughter Lisa, and Ged Mason – blazed a trail throughout the two-mile six-furlong event, worth over £85,000 to the winner, and sauntered across the line 23 lengths ahead of his old foe 5-4 favourite Djelo.

Jockey Harry Skelton said: "I haven't ridden many with the constitution and toughness of him. He went a two-mile gallop, it's unbelievable. He's so tough and so brave, he's the maddest horse I've ever ridden. He is crazy, he'll come out tomorrow and want to go five times around the gallop.

"We'll go now to the Ryanair [Chase], but we're not naive enough to think this wasn't a big day for him. Everything was just perfect today, we're delighted with him.

"This and the Ryanair were his two big targets for the year, it's going to be hard to retain his title because the clock has ticked past 10 years old. He's not getting any younger, but he'll make them run, he'll make them work for it."

THE last race at Fakenham's meeting yesterday was abandoned due to insufficient medical cover following a fall involving rider Gearoid Harney in the preceding race.

Riding Micronormous for David Pipe in the Sky Bet Queen Boudicca Series Final Mares' Handicap Chase at 3.20pm, Harney and his mount fell on the bend. While Micronormous appeared to emerge unscathed, Harney was taken to hospital.

The last race had been scheduled for 3.50pm, but could not go ahead as the light was fading fast by the time Harney had been treated at the track.

Dream comes true for Hatton as he writes his name on trophy in Dubai

TYRRELL HATTON described his Hero Dubai Desert Classic victory as "a dream come true" after holding off New Zealand's Daniel Hillier.

Ryder Cup star Hatton went into the final round one behind Hillier at Emirates Golf Club but his three-under-par 69 and 15-under total proved enough to claim a record-equalling fifth Rolex Series title.

"It feels amazing," said Hatton, who finished one ahead of Hillier and two clear of fellow Englishman Laurie Canter.

"I said earlier in the week, this is one of the events that you would like to have on your CV. It's such an iconic event for the DP World Tour.

"To add my name to the list of the amazing champions that have been before me, and to have my name on that trophy now, it's a dream come true.

"I'm not going to lie, I was pretty nervous on the back nine to be honest. I guess I just maybe wanted it a bit too much.

"I knew the position I was in, and