



THE HOME OF GOLF IS GOING DIGITAL

WORDS
MICHAEL CATLING
PICTURES
KENNY SMITH

At a time when the world of golf has come to a standstill, Scottish Golf are putting the finishing touches to a new app which might just safeguard the future of their golf courses and increase participation. So why do some clubs think it's too good to be true? Michael Catling went to Scotland to investigate...

Being a member of a golf club and maintaining a handicap is rarely without its challenges. Justifying the cost is one thing, but trying to remember half-a-dozen logins so you can book tee times, enter competitions and submit scores can make you wonder why you even bother.

As an official licensee of the new World Handicap System (WHS), Scottish Golf have spent the last three years working on a simpler and better solution. Now, they think they've found it with a Venue Management System (VMS) which brings together handicapping, digital scoring, tee-time bookings and membership management under one, centralised system.

The software has been configured to enable clubs and golfers north of the border to access a player's newly-updated handicap index, which will be calculated and published by Scottish Golf through a new central database of handicaps (CDH) from November 2. This will all be made available through a new free app, which is set to go live later this month. It means that every golfer in Scotland will soon be able to view their world handicap for the first time, more than six months ahead of schedule. It is one of many



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100 competitions, including their club championship. "I can't understand why clubs are not falling over themselves to get involved," says Seniors Captain Ian Samuel. "The app is amazing and is really straightforward to use, even for us older chaps." Gourock has since migrated over to an EPOS and booking system, saving an estimated £8,000 on updating their existing hardware and licensing agreements which is now being reinvested to refurbish the clubhouse.

"From a purely financial point of view, the club has had a significant benefit," admits Committee member Gordon Crae, who also works for Scottish Golf. "The app has become a one-stop shop for our members to get all their information in one place.

"We all know no one reads a club noticeboard anymore, but it's now in their face, on the app, and our events are being spoken about a lot more and the entries reflect that. The fact it all integrates with the World Handicap System and everyone will be able to see their CDH scores on the app just improves the whole member and visitor experience."

A DEMONSTRATION AT Scottish Golf's HQ reveals just how smart the tour-level technology actually is. It's been developed by OCS Sport, who produce software for more than 30 professional and amateur tours and governing bodies. With just a click of a button on a smartphone or tablet, golfers can pay fees, enter competitions, view live leaderboards and toggle between a virtual caddie and digital scorecard. There's even a GolfsApp messenger where you can arrange rounds of

Above: The Scottish Golf app is free and can be downloaded on the Google Play Store for Android users and Apple App Store for iOS users.



benefits which, Scottish Golf believe, will help educate golfers about the WHS and make it easier to submit general play and competition scores.

"A lot of the worry is what a golfer's handicap is going to be when they play anywhere other than their home course and how they calculate it," explains Iain Forsyth, Chief Commercial Officer. "The app will give you that breakdown and because it knows who you are and where you are, it will tell you what your playing index is and how many strokes you're getting. We think that's the most powerful way to educate a golfer because it is a big cultural change. When you show someone the evidence, that's when people truly understand the WHS."

Key to its success, however, will be convincing as many clubs as possible to start using the online platform which has been made available at no extra cost.

Of the 578 clubs currently affiliated to Scottish Golf, 227 have registered an interest, with 132 already configured or in parallel testing alongside their current independent software vendor (ISV).

Gourock in Renfrewshire was the first golf club to trial the system in April 2019 and has successfully run over

golf and a virtual noticeboard where clubs can keep members up-to-date about fixtures, local rules and important club meetings.

"I think because it's being provided by a governing body, people think it's not very good," says Forsyth, jokingly. "But someone explained the benefits to me perfectly: When you arrive in the car park, your phone will do everything for you until you leave. Currently, most clubs use a different type of software for their website, handicaps and tee-time bookings, which means the user needs three different logins. But the beauty of the VMS is that it knits everything together so golfers can access their handicap and everything else in one place. It is one integrated system, with one login and password that can be used on the Scottish Golf website and app.

"One of the issues clubs have is marketing their own opens. Until now, you normally had to visit that club's website. But a club can now use the app to advertise regional and national competitions, which can then be entered and paid for by a golfer using the same app."

For any club that wants it, Scottish Golf are offering a fully-customised website and iPad to operate the app at no extra cost. While this forms part of the recent increase in member affiliation fees, the VMS comes with the promise that clubs will no longer need to run multiple software packages, thus saving them time and money.

But despite being hailed as a "game changer that could potentially bring in millions" by Andrew McKinlay, Chief Executive of Scottish Golf, there remains a degree of hesitancy. We understand some golf clubs are against making the switch now because they only renewed their licensing fees with their current ISVs at the start of the year. Others are simply reluctant to support a system which, they think, could result in losing members to Scottish Golf's new virtual golf club (more on that, later).

"This is not a mandatory system; it is completely optional for all golf clubs," explains David Kernohan, Handicapping and Course Rating Officer for Scottish Golf. "If they wish to use their independent software vendors, we are more than happy for them to do so because they still provide booking sheets, competition management, membership and EPOS systems. The only caveat will be that following the introduction of the new World Handicap System, golfers in Scotland



To replicate the 'tour player' experience, the app lets you view live leaderboards during competitions.



HOW THE APP WORKS

BOOK ONLINE

Members can sign up for competitions and book and pay for lessons, social events or anything else that the club offers online through the app. Clubs can also promote open competitions nationally for non-members to enter.

VIRTUAL CADDIE

The GPS lets you find courses near you and tells you the exact yardages to that day's pin, plus your pace of play.

DIGITAL SCORING

Competition scores cannot be verified unless your marker's scorecard matches your own, making it physically impossible to sign for a wrong score.

FULLY INTEGRATED

The EPOS system means you can go to the bar, pay for a drink and ask them to book a tee time for you.

Left: Clubs can now go 'green' and encourage golfers to use a digital scorecard on the app.

will have to login to Scottish Golf's app or website to view their handicap information, which is where the handicap calculations will happen and all the

scores are held. This will be one of the changes under WHS – and it's the same across the whole of GB&I.

"The calculation of handicap now sits with each individual home nation, so it's not just a Scotland thing. But we are aware clubs do have plans with another system provider and so may not want to incur any fees or extra charges. That's why we are encouraging clubs to run parallel tests so they can decide when and if they want to make that switch."



SCOTTISH GOLF MIGHT not like to admit it, but they do find themselves under pressure to address an imbalance where golf club members, who contribute to the majority of club maintenance and associated costs, are leaving because it works out cheaper to pay per round. Worrying statistics from the KPMG Golf Participation Report last year show that 7,521 golf club members in Scotland were lost between 2017-18 – a drop of nearly 80,000 since 2005. The knock-on effect saw 19 courses lost in 2016 and 18 more axed in 2017. Many others are now at risk, including five of Glasgow council's six municipal golf courses and five in South Ayrshire which have been earmarked for closure due to low usage.

"We think there are just over 180,000 members of Scottish Golf and three times that many playing golf who are not members of any club," estimates Forsyth. "One of the biggest issues affecting clubs right now is the prices being charged by tee time providers. When a membership costs £800 and one green free is only £20, simple maths will tell you that it will work



COULD A VIRTUAL GOLF CLUB REALLY WORK?

A similar scheme called Flexiclub is currently being used in New Zealand, where independent golfers pay £15 a month or £120 for the year to become an official member of New Zealand Golf. They then gain access to tee sheets and affiliated green fee rates, plus they get to keep an official handicap. England Golf have also been debating launching a virtual golf club with counties and clubs for some time. In a statement, they told us: "In January, we sent a survey to all our affiliated clubs to get their feedback on key questions. The results are now being collated. The best way to sum it up is that the discussions remain ongoing. There is a broad consensus from all parties to engage with independent golfers, but how this is done is still being discussed."

per-play golfers will be able to obtain and maintain an official handicap by playing in open competitions and submitting general play scores. Any booking or green fee will then go directly to the individual club, rather than any third-party organisation like Tee Times which have been known to take a 20 per cent cut.

"The idea is to encourage clubs to get more green fees and to embrace the independent golfer in a positive way," says Forsyth. "We are giving golf clubs the power to choose whether they want to make their tee times available to the independent golfer. But because they can identify them through their login and CDH number, they can charge the usual green fee and entry fees and keep 100 per cent of the revenue."



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out cheaper if you pay to play less than 40 times a year. That needs to change a little..."

To help flip this, Scottish Golf have introduced a virtual golf club for independent golfers to coincide with the launch of the WHS on November 2. For a £5 monthly fee, pay-

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WHAT ARE ENGLAND GOLF DOING?

Unlike Scottish Golf, who are going with one software provider to cover all bases, the governing bodies in England, Wales and Ireland are looking to engage with the current ISVs to provide continuity for clubs who use them for myriad things other than handicapping. We understand England Golf are producing an easy-to-use handicap app, developed by DotGolf, which will allow golfers to access their handicap index and input scores. This will likely go live after the launch of the WHS, when every governing body becomes the central authority for handicapping in their territory.



WHAT THEY SAY...



"It's more than just an app which allows you to input your scores and calculate your handicap index. The system knows who you are and allows us to value membership at other clubs so we can offer a better rate. For independent golfers, we can offer them the chance to play the course at a higher rate, but with the added incentive of being able to enter an open competition when it's quiet. That does two things: It gets the visitor revenue up, but also gives people the exposure to a club which will hopefully convert to a membership. If you add up all the green fees you need to pay as an independent golfer, on top of the £60-a-year 'virtual golf club' subscription, you don't need to play too much until you enter a membership category."

Derek Watters, head pro at Gourock Golf Club

A 21ST CENTURY GOLF CLUB

Gourock are running all competitions 100 per cent digitally, which is now possible through the use of the Scottish Golf VMS. This means users can pay and book online, check in through the app without having to go inside the club, and then submit their scores digitally. Should social distancing return, Gourock have also made it possible for golfers to sign as both the marker and player on the app to avoid sharing phones and any physical contact.