

# The San Roque Club: A new life for the Old



A bark mulch has been used throughout the course to reduce the amount of maintained turf, saving water and labour

By Toby Ingleton

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**In the fiercely competitive luxury club market on the southern tip of Spain, intuition might suggest that extravagant spending is necessary to attract wealthy members and guests. But with a peer group that includes Valderrama, Sotogrande, La Reserva and Finca Cortesin, that might not set you apart from the crowd. When a new ownership group took control of The San Roque Club, it opted for a different approach.**

By the mid-2010s, some 25 years after it had first been laid out, the Old course at San Roque had grown tired. Drainage was a particular problem. The area typically gets five to six major storms each year and these would render the course unplayable for days while the grounds crew repaired damage, particularly to the bunkers. At its lowest point, following a storm in 2016, flooding caused major damage to the clubhouse and some of the surrounding residences.

As the club began to falter, its members – who at that time were preparing an acquisition bid of their own – sought advice on how best to revitalise a course that had previously been fit to play regular host to the European Tour’s qualifying school finals.

They called upon golf course consultant John Clarkin of the Ireland-based Turfgrass Consultancy firm for help. He made the trip to Spain, walked the course, drafted his recommendations, and waited to hear back.

In late 2018, shortly after that visit, events took a turn. Management and development group Golf Estate swooped in and, in just a few months, a deal to purchase San Roque was done. Responsibility for the club’s revival now lay with its new president Stephen Dundas.

Dundas – a former British Amateur champion who also competed in the 1993 Masters – was drawn to the proposals detailed in Clarkin’s report to the members. Sensing that they shared a common vision for a golf course that would be firm and fast, enjoyable to play and sustainable, and would complement a new ethos he was developing for the club – he made contact.

They agreed that the bones of the course’s original routing by Dave Thomas were strong, making good use of the undulating terrain and sitting at ease with the low-density housing that lines a handful of its fairways. But time had taken its toll; tree growth was shrouding the holes and too many of the hazards had either become less relevant or were more of a hindrance to enjoyment than a strategic challenge.

Dundas says: “My first thought was to make the golf course as dry as possible – I wanted it to play firm and fast. But it also had to be sustainable. A lot of projects start off grand, but can’t be maintained after three or four years.”

This focus on sustainability would be a driver for many of the design decisions. A plan was drawn up to remove almost half the bunkers and 18 hectares of maintained turf would be replaced with mulch. A new state-of-the-art irrigation system from Rain Bird would contribute to a reduction in water use estimated to be somewhere between 35 and 50 percent – a massive saving given the cost of water in southern Spain.

“The length of the course would be shorter too – bucking the trend,” says Dundas. “I never had the temptation to make it longer – it’s no fun and it adds more expense. At 6,500 metres from the back tees it’s already more than long enough for our members and guests. And we made a conscious decision to not aim to host a tour event.”

Dundas felt that by creating an enjoyable and playable golf course with a reduced maintenance burden, he could focus resources and effort on top-tier conditioning, and providing members and guests with great service.

Joining Dundas and Clarkin on the project team would be Target Ingenieros, the Spanish group led by former tour pro Manuel Piñero, to handle engineering and consult on the design, and Atlantic Golf Construction, the Ireland-based construction firm led by Anthony Bennett.

In November 2019 work began on stripping the existing course to its bare bones, removing the turf, removing three lakes and streams that were difficult to negotiate and penal, and pruning back the course’s beautiful cork oak trees. “We got to see the golf course naked,” says Dundas. “Once we’d cleaned up every tree on the golf course there was space, it lifted everything up and revealed the incredible views.”

“But the main idea was to make golfers feel like they had more space from the tee. You can get your driver out and smash it, which people love to do.” This sets up for what would become very much a “second shot” course, he says.

With this clearance work complete, ground was broken for construction work at the start of January 2020, with an ambitious target of reopening to members at the start of November. Progress was swift. The weather was great, allowing work to continue at pace each day.

And then the pandemic hit.

On 15 March, just over two months into the project, the Guardia Civil arrived on the property and shut down construction.

But halting work at this point would leave the bare ground exposed to washouts and presented a significant flood risk, particularly in early spring, one of the region's storm seasons. The club shared footage of previous flooding with the authorities, and it was enough to convince them of the threat to safety. Work was permitted to proceed, albeit very cautiously and with a minimal crew in those next few weeks, and subject to considerable restrictions for the entirety of the project.

The resolve of the club's partners was put to the ultimate test. Atlantic is fast developing a reputation for getting things done – its work at Adare Manor and Ballybunion being cases in point. But would they be able to step up in another country?

The answer was a resounding yes. When the lockdown came, members of the construction crew were given the option to continue work or head home. Even though it would mean weeks on end without seeing their families, and with next to nothing open in the area, almost all stayed on.

Clarkin and the Turfgrass team demonstrated their commitment to the client, too. "Contractually, John was supposed to be here a few days each month, but he must have spent over 100 days on site during the project – at one point he was here for three weeks non-stop," says Dundas. "A massive shout-out to Anthony and Atlantic, too. Their passion and dedication to getting us open in 2020 was quite incredible."

Delays were inevitable. Sprigging was initially scheduled to start around the end of April but began at the end of June. But the stakes were high. Dundas explains: "The consequences of not getting done before winter, having to come back in April, and the golf course not ready until September or October 2021... no way we would have been able to sell memberships and take fees."

The Atlantic Golf Construction team pulled out all the stops to recover the time lost to Covid-related delays. "Our focus is a willingness to get the project done for the client," says Bennett. More machinery and manpower was recruited, and club members even joined the effort to help sprig fairways.

"It was incredible to witness," says Clarkin. "The project culminated with over 40 machines and more than 80 people at work on a single hole – the eighth – to complete seeding on the last day of August."

Working with Atlas Turf, Clarkin selected Latitude 36 bermudagrass for fairways and surrounds and Pure Select for greens and tees, which were carefully nurtured by grow-in superintendent Mark Doyle and Turfgrass Consultancy's on-site project manager Craig Hanney. "Thirteen weeks after seeding we sent a sample to European Turf Laboratories and they could not believe how well developed it was," says Clarkin. "The root system is phenomenal."

“Tees alone will be 8.5 to 9 on the stimp,” says Dundas. “Greens are somewhere around 11. There are a lot of false front areas where the bent is running at 9. Conditioning is right up there with the best courses in the area.”

For Dundas to achieve his goal of outstanding playing surfaces, it helps that coverage is now substantially lower.

“We reduced the turfed area from about 55 hectares to 37,” says Clarkin. Such a dramatic reduction was designed both to minimise the water and labour requirement for the golf course, and to give the layout crisp definition. Areas that were previously turfed are now covered with a bark mulch, delivering a similar effect to the pine straw at Augusta National. The mulch requires almost no maintenance and provides a marked contrast with turfed areas, giving the Old course an aesthetic that is quite unique in the area. Balls that come to rest on the mulch can be easily found, removing the frustrating experience of scrambling through undergrowth, but still demand a recovery shot.

Dundas’s appreciation of Augusta is apparent in the new bunkering scheme too. Thirty bunkers were removed from the original layout, leaving just 40, each of which has been strategically positioned so that the player has options to consider for each shot.

With fewer bunkers, the design team also felt comfortable increasing their severity, largely in the form of depth. “There are only four greenside bunkers from which you can actually see the putting surface,” says Dundas.

The bunkers have been lined with the Better Billy Bunker system, which has already been put to the test. A storm hit the course shortly after completion of the bunkers and not one required any work. Dundas estimates that it previously required 150 hours of labour to get bunkers back in play after a storm. And with a typical year having six or seven such storms, that’s over 1,000 hours of labour that can now be invested elsewhere on the course.

Dundas says the project team has succeeded in delivering a course that will require far less resource while delivering a much more enjoyable playing experience – surely the golden formula for any club embarking on work?

The emphasis on enjoyment and conditioning aligns with Dundas’s broader new ethos for the club, which is to provide a relaxed environment with exceptional quality and service. And his goal is for that to be affordable quality. Many of San Roque’s peers undoubtedly offer an exceptional experience for visiting golfers, but at a cost that means for most it will be a one-off. Dundas is setting a price point that will allow people to return again and again. By reducing the resource requirement of the course, more can be invested in the provision of outstanding service. “In terms of the gate-to-gate experience, we are going to be the best in the area,” he says. Every detail has been considered – such as the switching of nines to improve the flow of guests from clubhouse area to course and back again. The former tenth hole is now the first, with the tees in full view of the clubhouse area, giving more of a “sense of occasion” to the opening shot. And the round now closes on the adjacent green right in front of the clubhouse, as opposed to the former eighteenth – now the ninth – which is 50 metres away.

Even during construction, as the new vision for the club began to emerge, membership numbers were increased by a third. By the official opening this summer Dundas will be even closer to his goal of around 600 members.

Everything the new ownership group promised its members, existing and new, was delivered. “Eighty-two golfers played the Old course on 5 December,” says Dundas. “A full renovation had been completed in 11 months during a global pandemic – it’s a massive achievement for our partners and their businesses.” The end result is a course that is “hard, dry, fun and fair,” says Dundas. “As a member you could play every day of your life and not tire of it.”

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