

Shaping up for success

Lee McLaughlan goes through his paces under the watchful eye of head professional Mark Williams at the PGA Residential Academy at Formby Hall.

After a two-day course at Formby Hall, the UK's only PGA Residential Academy, **Lee McLaughlan** discovered how to put his game on course after a measure of hard graft leavened with luxury

JUST one hour into my two-day residential course at Formby Hall and I was golf's equivalent of Steve Austin – the \$6 million dollar man. I needed rebuilding but sadly there was no bionic eye to aid my putting, nor bionic legs or right arm to add power and precision to my game.

Thankfully, I was in the right place as Formby Hall, located on England's golf coast with the likes of Hillside and Royal Birkdale for neighbours, has the proud boast of being the UK's only PGA Residential Academy.

It offers two residential courses – a two-day 10-hour programme or a five-day 12-hour programme, the latter freeing up the afternoon for practice, playing, sight-seeing or just a spot of R&R. With a gym, swimming pool and spa plus a well-regarded restaurant there is no shortage of options or luxury while also savouring the benefits of the four-star hotel.

However, every golfer is there to graft as the point is to learn. Intensive learning brings with it a host of advantages according to the golfing surgeon at Formby Hall – head professional Mark Williams.

After an eye-opening warm-up, we began the teaching on Formby Hall's tricky par-three course where Williams

extolled how the greatest coaches in the world, such as Butch Harmon, David Leadbetter and Pete Cowen, require their students to be with them over a period of time.

"Any golf pro will tell you it's difficult to 'police' what your students do between lessons," Williams said. "You can give them drills and get them to do certain things in the lesson but when they come back a fortnight or month later you can see that they've fallen back into old habits."

"The beauty of having someone with you for 10 or 12 hours is you can really monitor what they're doing and ensure they're practising effectively rather than rushing through it. Practice in golf is always about quality not quantity."

The practice facilities on offer are also high on quality with a state-of-the-art teaching suite, packed with the latest hi-tech equipment. This is complemented by a short-game area, the challenging par-three course, a 26-bay covered driving range, putting green and 18-hole championship course.

It is an arsenal that will ensure that every golfer leaves having improved aspects of their game.

In my first 60 minutes under the microscope with Williams, he had diagnosed my posture as poor, highlighted my club

Formby Hall has all the hi-tech facilities to improve your game. © Andrew Bate Photography. And afterwards you can relax in luxury.

face was closed on my swing and that my putting alignment was consistently off line. He could see that without the technology but he captured it with his 'hi-tech lab' of Trackman launch monitor and GASP video analysis system allowing the pupil to also see the faults. Filmed from all angles and with every possible stat recorded, Williams was already armed with significant information to improve my game.

Every pupil undergoes this so Williams has an insight into each of his students, while he also undertakes a club-fit assessment to ensure they have the right weapons.

Having seen me in action on the par three, where my sporadic successes with the wedges and knack of leaving putts short became evident, Williams set to work.

The beauty of the resort's par-three course is that every club from a four-iron to a lob wedge is needed and for Williams getting to see pupils on the course is a vital factor.

"As a teaching pro you generally only see your students in a lesson bay but not out on the course in the heat of the battle," he said. "The great thing about this is that we see how people act and think differently from a regular lesson."

"That's when you can see how they react under pressure with just one ball – and not necessarily in a bay or suite where they always have another ball to play. There are no consequences, so it's important to make every shot have a consequence."

"It's also a chance to establish good course management, to reflect on shot options and then having the chance to work through those choices and actions back in the bay."

Among the most potent lessons is the short game as everyone heads for home knowing how to play a shot to the green from 30 yards through to 100 yards. This is the crucial scoring zone in golf and Williams produces a simple drill to leave the player in no doubt what club to take and how hard to swing it to achieve a pin-point distance.

Admittedly it takes practice and time to pick up, but even in the lab after two or three attempts you'll know how to hit that pitch, sand, gap or lob wedge with more precision.

Better still, you'll leave with the information written down so that next medal becomes even easier.

Ironing out the foibles with your putter relies on feel as much as science. Being hooked up to a SAM Putt Lab was proof of the pudding in terms of accuracy. It illustrated that my ball skidded rather than rolled on connection, a bad thing, while it was generally half a degree off line, which is almost impossible to detect with the naked eye.

Remedies to correct this are simple, while a drill on the putting green worked on adding distance through feeling and intuition. The brain does absorb a lot of information and Williams is aware that it needs to be cajoled into

“ We see them out on the course in the heat of battle ”

taking it all in to ensure the learning process works, so a lot of the work is done in pairs both to provide a fun, challenging environment but also feedback. With my brain having undergone a workout of its own, the rest of the body was due to undergo a 'golf specific' workout under the watchful eye of Russ – a fitness instructor in the gym.

Like the rest of the resort, no expense has been spared in kitting it out. The golf workout relies on Technogym Kinesis equipment, which is also used at PGA headquarters in training the next generation of golf coaches in biomechanics.

The apparatus at Formby Hall offer a multi-choice exercise programme to work on toning or resistance, but the equipment is also perfect for working particular muscle groups or to strengthen the core, which is key for golfers.

During my hour under the cosh, Russ had me working on series of exercises that improved the core muscles and strengthened those in the arm and back to add power. He also illustrated a swing-specific one shown him by Sir Nick Faldo!

This workout is an optional extra during the residential course, but with significant free time during the five-day stay it is an option worth exploring.

The two packages on offer at Formby Hall, which include breakfast, lunch and dinner and accommodation in a standard room, have been fine-tuned by Williams for 2010.

"This is one of the best ways to enhance your golf whatever your ability or if you're a beginner to learn it from scratch."

"We're finding more people want to book packages and so I have refined them to make them more affordable but also with a view to targeting specific groups like beginners or ladies or the improver. It's not always possible but these groups normally have generic issues. As the only PGA-branded residential course in the country, we pride ourselves on the experience we can offer the golfer."

• For more details on Formby Hall's residential golf packages visit www.formbyhallgolfresort.co.uk

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