

Let's do the show right here: Jerry, left, and Paul Sarvadi at the Renaissance Club overlooking the Firth of Forth



A RENAISSANCE MAN: THE MAKING OF A GOLFING FAIRYTALE

Kenny Kemp finds out how a unique Scottish golf club, a drive and a chip away from the world famous Muirfield, started as a twinkle in the eye of one stubborn American entrepreneur

Once upon a time there were six brothers who loved golf. They lived all over a large country and once a year got together to compete in their favourite pastime. One afternoon all the brothers were in the clubhouse when a fairy-godfather told them that in a far-off land there was a piece of nirvana for lease. One of the stubborn brothers called Jerry tried to persuade the other five that this was a chance of a lifetime. But they shook their

heads and did not believe him. Undeterred, Jerry set off on an adventure to find out how to do a deal in Scotland. He came to tranquil East Lothian and was bewitched by its beauty and the bountiful fairways and greens. He returned home, extolling such virtues, saying that the fairy-godfather had indeed come up with a unique opportunity. His enthusiasm won over his brothers' support, and they then set about

creating one of the greatest golf courses in the world. Today the Renaissance Club – next to world famous Muirfield – is smack bang in the middle of golfers' heaven. The club, on the Archerfield Estate, is 335 acres of windswept beauty situated along the coastline of the Firth of Forth. Hollywood couldn't write a better film script: a feelgood movie about the rewards for the hard-working and entrepreneurial Sarvadi >>



brothers – Gerald or Jerry, Paul, Mike, Jim, Dave and John – who turned an at-the-bar dream into a reality. And it is a yarn that involves Arnold Palmer, the world's greatest golfer, although the sprightly octogenarian hasn't yet graced the wonderful fairways of this exclusive club.

Scotland abounds with world-class golf courses and East Lothian has many of the finest with a chain stretching from Kilspindie, Gullane, Luffness, along to the hallowed Muirfield, home of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers and venue for The Open, 2013, and on to North Berwick's open links. So why did Scotland need another one? And in the teeth of an economic downturn were there really rich Americans out there willing to shell out a £60,000, 30-year bond payment and £2,500 a year membership to share Jerry's dream? It's a question that he and Paul can answer easily.

"We wanted to build the ultimate golf course for our dad, our brothers and our friends," says Jerry, sitting upstairs in a hand-made Belgian carpeted lounge overlooking the Forth. "A friendly place where you would feel at home and nothing was spared to make the golf course a wonderful place to enjoy. "And, yes, there are people willing to pay for the absolute privilege of being a member of a club in this wonderful part of the world." He adds that there are now 160 members from all over the globe with the aim to have 600.

The Renaissance Club is building an unenviable reputation among the golfing fraternity. Golf course design-wizard Tom Doak has sensitively sculpted the topography; his minimal approach uses the natural wooded environment and contours with trees pruned to reveal tantalising vistas. Green superintendent Paul Seago, who sits on the R&A greenkeeping committee, has planted local grass seed that prospers in the loamy soil, while the drainage is natural, coping with the heaviest downpours. The result is a natural green carpet that some low-handicappers sacrilegiously whisper surpasses its illustrious neighbour. The work isn't finished though; only one of the five lodges has been completed so far, housing the Pro Shop, locker rooms and nine



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bedrooms for members and guests. Jerry and Paul are adding another three holes along the coast to make it a 21-hole golfing experience. It was Jerry and Paul's dad, George – the son of Transylvanian immigrants to the US Mid-West – and husband to Trudy, who instilled a love of golf in his six sons and three daughters. He viewed it as a game that taught his children a lot about the ups and downs of life. Jerry, now 61, was still in high school when he became a caddy master at the Aurora Golf Club in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1966, when he was 17, the Cleveland Open was held at the club and won by Arnold Palmer who collected \$30,000. One of Jerry's young buddies was given \$3,000 by Palmer as his share. This generosity inspired a life-long admiration for Arnold. But it was Paul, 53, who later got the chance to take Arnold on as an ambassador for his

national US business. Its success allowed Paul to be a significant personal investor in Jerry's plan. Paul set up Administaff in April 1986 with a mission to help small and medium-sized business succeed by offering a full service human resources department.

"It had been tough in Texas in the early 1980s and I'd watched some small companies crash and burn and I wondered how could I make it easier for them to survive," says Paul, who was inducted into the Texan Business Hall of Fame in 2007.

"I came up with this package for small and medium-sized companies that could help them with all of their human resources issues – and it took off."

Administaff grew like wildfire and Paul, the chief executive officer and chairman, took the company on to the New York Stock Exchange in January 1997. He was an Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year in 2001. Today Administaff has nearly 6,000 clients, more than 100,000 worksite employees and 1,800 corporate employees.

While the Texas-based company hit it right with its products, it also scored a hole in one with its marketing.

"There are around 600,000 firms in our target market in the US and two-thirds of them have golf as their number one non-work pastime," says Paul. "I wanted to use golf to get to those 400,000."

He had been invited to many corporate golfing business events and one day he picked up a phone call in his office asking if he'd like to have Arnold Palmer join his company. He thought it was one of his practical joker buddies. Then, when he was assured it really was Arnold, he agreed a deal.

Palmer turned golf into a global game in the 1950s and 1960s. It was his charm, style and talent that took it beyond America and brought it back to Britain – and Scotland – at a time when television was turning it into a truly global sport. Having Palmer in your business was a piece of gold dust.

Silver-haired Palmer joined Administaff's team and their first advert sent a shiver up Paul's spine. He was standing in an airport lounge when Palmer's distinctive tones beamed out. Everyone waiting for their plane looked up at the screen and the legend smiled, saying:



The hole shebang: Jerry Sarvadi's enthusiasm for the Renaissance Club project rubbed off on his family, including his brother Paul, left

"Small business is good for America. Administaff is good for small business." Not quite Shakespeare, but it was simple and highly effective for Administaff. Overnight, it had national recognition, helping the company make the big time. The relationship has continued and now one of Paul's ambitions is to have Arnold come and play the Renaissance. "We have around \$1.7bn in revenues, and no debt," he says of Administaff proudly. The Renaissance Club has an atmosphere unlike almost any other golf club. On this August morning, it has a distinctive family feel as the Sarvadi brothers and sisters gather in the large temporary clubhouse. They have all flown to Scotland from across the US to be together; there are children and grandchildren and lots of noise as families and friends greet each other.

Even in stuffy East Lothian – Scotland's answer to The Hamptons – the locals have taken to Jerry and the Sarvadi clan. Jerry made more than 20 trips before he was able to secure the lease from the trustees of the Duke of Hamilton and he stayed in nearby Aberlady. Brother Mike, a genial host who made his money in the aviation technology business, is virtually a local resident now spending half the year in Scotland. So, how did Jerry come to invest in a Scottish golf course? The recent experiences of up-market Loch Lomond Golf Club, set up by Lyle Anderson but forced into administration and a sale, suggested that times are hard for many clubs. Even the planning travails of a property tycoon Donald Trump in Aberdeenshire might deter investors from coming to Scotland. Not so, this is East Lothian. The raised beaches

make it ideal conditions for golf. The microclimate that gives the strip from Musselburgh to Dunbar more hours of sunlight than the rest of Scotland allows rugged green grass to thrive in sandy soils. And if a golf course designer of Doak's genius takes that into consideration, then there is something special. That, and far fewer midges. The Sarvadi brothers use golf as a reason to get together and catch-up and they are encouraged to invite a friend. Two such friends were Don Lewis and Pandel Savic, a former American football quarter-back and business partner of Jack Nicklaus. Don knew about Archerfield and in the bar after 36 holes at the US Open course at Pinehurst in North Carolina, he was the fairy-godfather who raised the question. "Do you want to buy a golf course?" All the brothers laughed. >>

"No way," they replied, almost in unison. "It's in Scotland." Still they shook their heads. "Right next to Muirfield."

Jerry admits the boys had all been enjoying a glass or two of Californian red, and while they dreamed of what it might be like, they all dismissed it. All, but Jerry.

Jerry's introduction to Scotland was in April 2002. He was playing golf back home in Jacksonville, Florida, when he was introduced to Barry Hyde, then responsible for MasterCard International's golf promotion.

"He had then one of the best jobs in the whole world. He got to spend \$30 million a year on golf," laughs Jerry. "But he went over and worked for the US Golf Association, forging links with the PGA tour and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club in St Andrews." MasterCard were one of the sponsors of the Open at Muirfield and Barry asked Jerry and his son-in-law Derek Siewert, if they would like to play on one of the corporate trips. Jerry, then running his own aviation oil business, was surprised to get the invitation but knew a lot of Americans had called off coming to Europe after the atrocities of September 11, 2001.

"I think we were invited to make up the numbers – and of course I had to back the aviation industry," he says. But Jerry thought the chance too good to miss.

"We flew over and arrived at Edinburgh very early in the morning. It was wet and dismal day and I thought 'this must be Scotland'. I rented a car and started driving around the bypass towards East Lothian and onto the A1. I'd just come off the dual-carriageway and the sun came out. It was an absolutely beautiful morning but I could see it was still raining over Edinburgh."

Derek and Jerry met up with Barry and the Muirfield party for the tee-off time just after 8am.

He says: "We played two rounds. Then it was still glorious, so we went out again for another 18 holes. We finished at 9:15pm and it was still light. I played some of my best golf ever." It was etched in his mind. So when Jerry heard from Don that attempts had been made to build a new course, next door to Muirfield on the Archerfield Estate, but had stalled,



I could sense where the holes would be. The setting was spectacular. The prospect was beguiling

he was eager to understand more. He went to see solicitors Biggart Baillie, who were working on behalf of the Duke of Hamilton and his family, in their Edinburgh office. The Renaissance Club's property is controlled via a trust by Hamilton & Kinneil (1987), which represents the Duke of Hamilton's family and H&K (Archerfield), both companies controlled by family trusts. The land for the golf course would be leased for 99 years from H&K (1987).

The American visitor walked through the woods near Dirlerton and could see how close it was to Muirfield. The southern boundary is Home Farm, the residence of the late duke and duchess.

"I could sense where the holes would be," he recalls. "The setting was spectacular. The prospect was beguiling."

He spent the next two-and-a-half years talking to and persuading his brothers. He retired from his aviation business and the course became his obsession although, at times, he thought of simply walking away.

"There was a major cultural difference over in Scotland about getting things done," he says. "There were a lot of planning issues to contend with and while I found East Lothian Council officials extremely helpful, we had to do it properly."

"This is an area of extreme beauty, it has to remain unspoiled. The terminology was strange and I took a couple of years. But I just kept going, though."

The partnership deal and lease was eventually signed and Jerry is spending around £10m developing the course, giving Paul Seago the best possible equipment to keep it in immaculate condition.

"We're committed to ensuring the long-term viability of the club," he says. "It's all about the condition of the course. We've been very conservative. We raised the capital among our family and friends. We went out and approached them first and we've been supported by some golf fanatics who haven't even been over to play here yet."

Jerry knows only too well that this is not a short-term affair; that to make this work required attention to detail and dedication to the project. He is sure that the course will buck the economic trend.

"We haven't used bank finance," he says. "We're still building membership but it won't be crowded. We want to maintain that Sarvadi family atmosphere; that's the reason we're all here."

There's also a benefit in having a large family. "The project has family investors that extend beyond just mother, my brothers and sisters but also to sons-in-law and even fathers-in-law."

The Renaissance Club is the fruit of entrepreneurial hard work and toil. It's a tribute to a family vision. And there are lofty aspirations one day to create Scotland's Augusta Masters here. That would be a fitting tribute to Arnold Palmer and his involvement with the Sarvadi clan.

If you are a golfer and you get an invitation to "Come and play the Renaissance", it would be rude to turn down the chance. ■

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