



# MALTA GOLF ASSOCIATION

## POSITION PAPER ON GOLF

### PREAMBLE

The Malta Golf Association is fully committed to promote the sport of golf amongst a younger generation of Maltese. Despite the limited national resources that are hindering this progress, it remains the Association's aspiration to be in the vanguard to bring about this much required local expansion in this incredible game.

The Association's principal ambition is to take golf to sports-minded schools. The Association is prepared to act as an advising body on golf matters pertaining to such a development and intends to fully cooperate with the pertinent authorities to ensure a sustainable growth of the sport.

### GOLF DEVELOPMENT IN MALTA

The Association is strongly opinionated in favour of a policy whereby suitable land is released in favour of the development of the game of golf. The Association considers the possibilities to be twofold.

In the first instant the available land around the Marsa site, released in favour of the Royal Malta Golf Club, would enable the Club to address, in the short term, some of the current problems being experienced.

Additionally, the concession of land development permission on at least one other site would allow the Islands to realize the possibilities to credibly cultivate the sport on a national level as well as to further entice golf tourism.

The vision of the Association is to have 100 to 150 juniors regularly attending the Junior Academy within the next five years. It is also the vision of the Association to be able to build up national teams capable to participate successfully at junior and youth levels in international championships.

The Association is of the opinion that any golf course development concession should favour and encourage such a vision by ensuring that the national requirements of the sport are safeguarded through a proper **GOLF ACADEMY** incorporated within the confines of the development. The national needs of the sport should be enshrined through:

- Secured playing rights for the national team(s) and the junior academy participants;
- Reserved capacity on the practice areas for the team(s) and the juniors;
- Permission for the identified national coach to use the facilities;
- Allocation of an administration area to be identified as the national headquarters for the Association;
- Allotment of storage room for equipment including possibilities for indoor training; video analysis and projection facilities to enable proper lecturing.

## **PRESENT RESOURCES**

The only access to the game of golf is currently on the course administered by the Royal Malta Golf Club in Marsa. The RMGC course was first established in 1904 and massive improvements have been undertaken to upgrade the facilities especially over these last thirty years. The improvements are ongoing but the Marsa site remains restrained in its physical size and resources. Some of the limitations are:

- A full compliment of local membership competing with golf tourists for the allocation of playing tee-times;
- Inadequate Club House facilities (administration; shower rooms; lockers' space; catering amenities; etc) to meet the requirements of members and visitors;
- Short length of course preventing it from ever attaining international championship status;
- Tight fairways which do not meet international recommended standards;
- Inadequate outside training facilities;
- Lack of indoor training possibilities.

As the Association moves forward to develop a national team and to promote junior golf, the above restrictions have started to manifest themselves. As an example, during a recent visit by Mr Martin Westphal, the identified national team coach and one of the top ten golf development consultants in the world, the first hole at Royal Malta had to be closed off (for three hours for members and visitors) to enable the professional coach to assess (via the latest computer video analysis) the swing pattern and ball striking of the national team players. Additionally, junior golfers and rookies in the game are struggling to get any playing practice allocation on the golf course.

Additionally, the high usage of the course at Royal Malta can be assessed through the realisation that the number of golf rounds being currently played on the course is two to three times more than recommended. Furthermore, recently, the management of the Club had to stop a lucrative contract from a Swedish company that wanted to bring to Malta an average of 50 players per week. It is rational to understand that the current and only golf course cannot attract new local members and more visitors let alone be able to offer its facilities for the development of the game amongst a younger generation of Maltese. Golf in Malta is at a virtual standstill.

## **HISTORY**

The British constructed an admirable golf course in the middle of what is now industrial terrain. One would loathe to think how this site would have developed had it not been for such a spirited choice so many years ago. Unfortunately however, during the first ninety years of its local history, golf continued to be played practically exclusively by British forces personnel who understandably neither felt the responsibility nor had the foresight to foster the game locally.

It was only in the 1970's that the game became popular with the Maltese; once history had made it increasingly possible for local residents to enjoy the facilities at the Marsa grounds. The scenario led to a diverse membership that included, for the first time, fathers and sons – a common occurrence in other countries throughout the preceding two hundred years. The early efforts by Maltese run committees to foster the game among Maltese juniors were rewarded when, three years ago, a local boy brought back to our shores the first trophy won in a golf championship held abroad.

The need to establish the local governing body for the game of golf was first perceived in the early 1990's. Apart from the initial and very important contacts that were then established with pertinent national and international governing bodies, these first years of the Association were void of any constructive mechanisms to take the game forward. This situation has been addressed just over a year ago through a re-written Constitution and the election of an Executive Council enthusiastic to change the latent state of affairs.

## **ASSISTANCE vs. HINDRANCE**

On a sport development level, apart from the modest assistance in the form of travel grants from the Maltese Olympic Committee over these last eighteen months, the game has not received any significant national support - financial or otherwise.

On Club level, despite the importance of the game on the Islands' economy, the only contribution that golf has received were a governmental soft loan and the granting of the right of use (albeit through a lease agreement with a third party) for the golf course.

The most significant input was the removal of the horse race track that used to cross seven fairways on the golf course and the building of a perimeter wall on one part of the course. This was unfortunately negated due to the granting of an area on the golf course, on perpetual lease, to a fire works factory. The consequential annual physical and moral damage to the game are unbearable as are the systematic "attack" on the boundary walls and the incursion of third parties because of the insecure perimeter.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

Golf as a sport probably has the strongest interaction with the environment. Certainly no other sport occupies and manages such large areas of green space. In Europe alone, there are almost 6,000 golf courses, covering some 300,000 hectares and serving a golfing population of nearly 6 million people. Golf is a sizeable industry in its own right and continues to grow (31,000 golf courses and 50 million players worldwide). Any activity on this scale cannot function in isolation and it is important to understand the game's responsibilities towards the wider community.

*There are many situations where well-designed, constructed and managed golf courses can enhance the local environment. There are many examples of this across Europe. These cases show that new golf courses can bring a number of positive environmental outcomes, alongside other social and economic contributions.*

- Bringing habitats under long term, consistent conservation management.*
- Enhancing biological diversity and species richness.*
- Enhancing landscape ecology, creating larger habitat patch sizes with greater connectivity.*
- Enhancing landscape character and visual quality.*
- Conserving landscapes of cultural and historical importance.*
- Conserving archaeological and other cultural heritage features.*
- Improving water quality - reducing runoff of fertilisers and pesticides from previous levels (e.g. agriculture and industry).*
- Creating microclimates, shade and increasing soil and air moisture levels in warm climates.*
- Acting as 'green lungs' in towns and cities, mitigating air pollution and carbon release.*

## CONCLUSION

The debate in Malta is complicated because of the physical limitations we face. The Association, whilst acknowledging its support against any development that “attacks endemic and threatened species and habitats”, suggests that there must be zones that are acceptable for the construction of a golf course/academy. The Association considers that such correctly identified areas can and should be beneficial for the environment.

The Association believes that Malta is in a unique position where golf development and the pertinent issues arising from such a development are concerned. In the first instant the Islands’ geographical location together with their open friendliness, knowledge of the English language, mild weather, safe surroundings and deep historical backdrops still render them a forceful competitor not only in terms of attracting golf tourism but also in the field of golf education. Additionally, the bank of information available through international golf environmental, governing, development and educational bodies ensures that any proposals and decisions taken in favour of the game will be to the benefit of all concerned including and most pertinently the environment.

Back to the game’s development in Malta, the Malta Sports Council is making strident steps to encourage sport amongst children in schools, whilst the Malta Olympic Committee, in an effort to sustain a process towards “long term athlete development”, is spearheading the Clubmark accreditation programme. In its foresight the MOC understands that *“before we arrive at the champion, we have to ensure that the recruitment centres have a strong foundation and it is our duty to help the clubs with these tools”*.

Indeed it is also our duty to offer the best golfing opportunities to our youths. The Malta Golf Association’s willingness to cooperate with the political parties, the environmentalists and the sport authorities to reach consensus on the game’s development is underlined. A solution should and can be found which provides the investor with the economic return, the environment with the protection and the sport with the growth they respectively deserve.