

Going Dutch

From plastic and antique clubs, to a borrowed set from a 70-year-old for a European Tour event, PGA of Holland's Ralph Miller has bagged them all. Laura Cork reports

Born in Holland to a Dutch mother and American father, Ralph Miller can thank the stunning courses around Surrey for kick-starting his golfing career. His parents moved to Woking when he was five and his mother's golfing friends from Holland often came to play the neighbouring courses. On one visit, they gave him a plastic set of clubs. "They soon broke, and my dad bought me an old set at an antiques auction, which I used in the park. When I was eight, we moved back to Holland and I joined a course in Alkmaar," he recalls.

Miller progressed through the amateur ranks; he spent four years in the US on a scholarship and was a regular player in the Dutch national squad.

His career highlight is one that every pro would aspire to – and yet it came when he was still an amateur. "In 2000, just before I turned pro, I led the Dutch Open after the first round. That was an incredible feeling, playing so well in front of a home crowd, and it's one that I've never surpassed."

He turned professional later that year, aged 24, after successfully qualifying through tour school.

In 2001, Miller was handed another unusual set of clubs, when his failed to arrive for the opening round at the Italian Open, in Sardinia. "There were no tour vans, so I couldn't get a set of clubs built quickly, but the organisers said I could borrow the head pro's clubs."

Perfect, he thought – until he looked in the bag. "I was handed a set of Great Big Bertha oversize irons, with graphite senior flex shafts. What they hadn't told me was that the head pro was in his 70s! Nevertheless, I played pretty well with them, although I did miss the cut."

Miller spent six years playing the main tour and Challenge Tour, before deciding to do his PGA training at The Belfry. His mentor during his early playing days was Tom O'Mahoney, head pro at the Noordwijkse Golf club, but Miller later came under the guidance of John Woof, head pro at the Royal Hague Golf & Country Club. "John also helped me in my playing career, but particularly during my PGA training, when

I was learning about coaching and the business side of golf."

The training and Woof's tutelage stood him in good stead, and Miller is head pro at De Lage Vuursche, a members' club located north of Utrecht. "It's not the same set up as you'd find in the UK," he explains. "The pro shop is a resort-style shop, stocking premium clothing, and it's owned by the club. The professional team does coaching, club fitting and repairs."

Miller spends much of the day coaching, either on the range or on the course – with students from beginners to the current Dutch amateur champion.

Communication counts

Miller also has a daily catch-up with the director of golf and head greenkeeper – "it's vital in our jobs to communicate effectively, so we can give the members a great golfing experience." And communicating with golfers, he adds, is just as important: "You must keep interacting with members and visitors. If you show an interest – even just a quick question about their game in the clubhouse or the car park – it keeps them coming back for more. It's not just about your teaching ability; it's the interpersonal skills that count."

Miller says it's vital to keep learning: "For any club pro today, you must keep increasing your own knowledge, especially with all the new training aids at our disposal. You might not need them or even use them, but you must keep evolving as a coach."

Miller is still a force to be reckoned with on the course and his name is often found high up on tournament leaderboards – witness his second place in last month's Unicredit PGA Professional Championship of Europe, in Bulgaria.

"I'm lucky that I can still get to play two or three times a week," says Miller. "I play frequently with the members, both adults and juniors. Plus I play around 12 to 15 tournaments a year, in the PGA of Holland events and a couple of international events and pro-ams."

Golf is the third most popular sport in Holland, behind football and field hockey. Golf clubs took a hit when the recession



kicked in, and the sport has taken time to recover. "We're short on role models in our country," says Miller. "Joost Luiten is the only Dutch player on tour, while other countries around us have lots of players for kids to look up to."

That said, he believes Dutch golf could benefit from the Olympic effect, in the same way that field hockey has. "In the 2012 Olympics, the Dutch women won gold in field hockey and it was a huge boost for the sport. Hockey clubs here have really upped their game in terms of attracting the whole family – and the Netherlands Golf Federation is taking note. It's looking at implementing some of the same tactics in golf."

"We have to get families to the course, not just individuals. And that starts with the clubhouse – it shouldn't be a dusty, dark, traditional place. It needs to be bright and welcoming, with a room for kids to hang out in." Time to throw back the curtains.