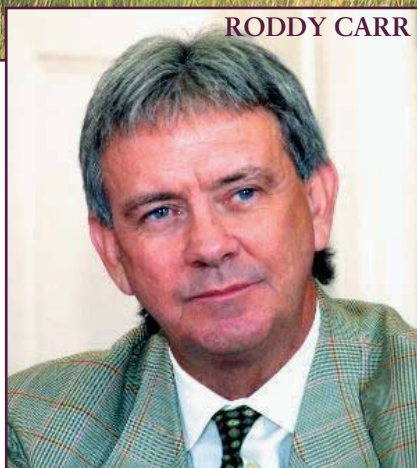


KILLEEN CASTLE



RODDY CARR



Describe how the AIB Ladies Irish Open has developed in recent years.

RC - The revival of the AIB Ladies Irish Open came about as a result of Ireland winning the rights to stage The 2011 Solheim Cup at Killeen Castle. It was a condition of the bid to host five Ladies Irish Opens and we and AIB felt it was the ideal vehicle to re-launch the staid image of women's professional golf in Ireland. We decided to go back to the simple and successful model of the original men's Irish Open and bring in the best female players in the world and make

tickets freely available. The model worked very well for us, we had 10,000 spectators the first year and 15,000 in 2009.

In such challenging times AIB Bank's commitment to the Ladies Irish Open and 2011 Solheim Cup is vital. What is their level of involvement?

RC - AIB are the Title Sponsor of the Ladies Irish Open and a Global Partner Sponsor of The Solheim Cup, which is the highest level of sponsorship with PING & Rolex. Failte Ireland is an important host sponsor of both events at this top level.

When did you become centrally involved in the AIB Ladies Irish Open and 2011 Solheim Cup and what roles do you fulfil in relation to these prestigious events?

RC - AIB were involved right from the beginning. I solicited the help of Jim Kelly from AIB, whom I considered to be the most experienced sponsorship manager in the country, to assist me in the bid for the Solheim Cup. I needed intelligence and advice on the local market, having been away for so many years. His input assisted us greatly in winning the bid, as did the support that Failte Ireland came up with.

AIB were the perfect partner for both events as their Supporting Clubs and Communities strategy matched perfectly with ours. We needed to penetrate these segments in women's golf and AIB were keen to do something for women in sport. This has worked very well for AIB as their research showed that brand recognition and 'feeling closer' to their brand exceeded expectations in the first two years. Their AIB Amateur Ladies Club Challenge will have over 3000 women competing from 280 clubs this year.

The AIB Ladies Irish Open has attracted many of the world's top lady golfers to Ireland. How do you 'sell' the event to the elite lady professionals?

RC - Our unique selling point in the first two years was hosting the event at the Portmarnock Hotel & Golf Links, a championship links course, and offering top level prize money on the LET.

We also put a special effort into personalising the event with the players. We took very good care of them offering them an old fashioned warm Irish welcome.

BOOM TIME FOR LADIES GOLF

In this interview tournament organiser **RODDY CARR** sets the scene for this year's AIB Ladies Irish Open (August 6th-8th) and The 2011 Solheim Cup, both of which will take place at the spectacular Killeen Castle Golf Club in County Meath.

This year we will move the event to Killeen Castle which will offer the players the unique opportunity of playing The 2011 Solheim Cup course in advance of the Matches. We also changed our date to August 6th-8th, the week after the Women's British Open, where all the top USA players compete. This will help us deliver the strongest field ever to play Women's Professional Golf in Ireland.

What sort of feedback have you received from the elite players?

RC - The feedback has been incredible. The event was acknowledged as the second best event on the LET by the players in only its second year. The US players spread very positive news about the event on the LPGA.

Last year you provided GB&Ireland's top lady amateurs with the opportunity to compete in the AIB Ladies Irish Open ahead of their appearance in the Vagliano Cup match. What special plans do you have for this year's AIB Ladies Irish Open at Killeen Castle in August?

RC - The Maguire twins - Lisa and Leona - were a huge draw last year and we paired them with Laura Davies and Maria Hjorth, our best players. I actually went out to watch them myself and was amazed by how professional they were. The only real difference was that they were 20 yards shorter off the tee. This year the event will go from strength to strength with players from the US and Europe and with the sheer quality of the Killeen Castle venue.

These are exciting times for our own lady tour players as they strive to record a first-ever Irish victory on the ladies circuit and

set their sights on a place on the European team for next year's Solheim Cup match.

How are they progressing in this regard?

RC - I am very optimistic about the progress of our girls on the LET Tour. Hazel Kavanagh had her best ever performances last year and Rebecca Coakley had three top-20, two top-ten and two top-five finishes last season. Martina Gillen is also capable of winning and young Tara Delaney will do better this year. In addition Alison Walsh from Galway, who is the only player that has her LPGA and LET playing card, has declared for (Ireland) Europe. So from being a 50/1 shot against having an Irish player on the 2011 Solheim Cup team a couple of years ago, I would put the odds now at 20/1.

The Solheim Cup is the women's equivalent of the Ryder Cup. What impact is this event likely to have on inbound golf tourism in the future?

RC - Fáilte Ireland invested in this event to deliver new business to Ireland. The women's segment is the fastest growing in golf and women have a 70% influence on the travel spend in the family. The reaction from the 120,000 spectators that attended the 2009 Solheim Cup event in Chicago was the strongest they have ever seen at a golf event in the last 10 years. The traffic generated from overseas for this event is expected to exceed that achieved from the Ryder Cup. People are already buying travel packages directly off the www.solheimcup.com website every week and from specialist tour operators; the majority to date are from the USA.

What kind of a spectacle will unfold at the Solheim Cup at Killeen Castle next year

and what are the expectations in terms of spectator numbers?

RC - We will have 100,000 spectators at The 2011 Solheim Cup. Killeen Castle is one of the best staging venues in Europe and has ample space to handle these numbers.

The spectacle that will unfold is the elite women golfers of the world competing in a fiercely competitive event for their countries with integrity and respect the cornerstones of the event. The event exploded in Chicago. There is a special female ingredient involved that doesn't exist with the Ryder Cup. The girls communicate better and more intimately with the crowd and with the fierceness of the battle there is also an element of love...very different.

In addition we will have a dedicated area for families and a huge Farmers Market

What is your vision for ladies golf in Ireland going forward?

RC - I am very, very optimistic. The Solheim Cup will leave a legacy that will be the foundation of or the 'beginning' for women's professional golf in Ireland. Lisa and Leona Maguire are destined to be world class players and will fly the Irish flag with pride for many years to come. People will remember The 2011 Solheim Cup at Killeen Castle in Ireland as the start of it all.



Diana Luna tees off on her way to winning the 2009 AIB Ladies Irish Open.

Feature photos courtesy of Twenty Eleven Irish Ladies Golf Promotions