

'HOW WE SAVED OUR GOLF CLUB'

Meet the former LET star who has transformed a rundown golf club in the middle of a pandemic

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Had things worked out differently, Fame Tate might still be travelling the world and competing on the Ladies European Tour. Instead, she's about to jump on a mower and inspect the golf course she now owns in her hometown of Chesterfield. Later she'll be manning the club's pro shop until it closes, but only after she's collected supplies for the restaurant and cooked lunch for dozens of members and visitors.

If you haven't guessed it by now, Fame isn't like your typical golf club owner, but then Stanedge isn't like your typical golf club. As recently as December 2018, Stanedge had lost all its members and was so rundown that its 10-hole course was likened to a field with flags in it.

"I remember walking the golf course on my own and it appeared very unloved and untidy," admits Fame now. "At the time, the sellers had drawn up 12 agricultural plots and I don't think they ever thought anyone would want to retain it as a golf club.

"The greens were nearly dead. There was no definition and it was not looked after how it should have been. When I came into the clubhouse, it was very similar, if not worse. It was quite shocking. It was cold, it was damp, it was dirty. Everything needed doing. It is easy



to forget now just how bad it was..."

As far as sales pitches go, it's hard to see the appeal of taking over a bedraggled golf club which everyone had seemingly given up on. There was also an issue of money, one that required a bank loan with her own house up as collateral. To her friends it represented a big gamble, though Fame says she never saw it that way.

"Stanedge wasn't a place that I held close to my heart, even though I only live five minutes away. It wasn't a sentimental purchase and it wasn't like I had always dreamed of owning a golf club either. It was never really a consideration but when the opportunity came around, it just seemed right. At the time I was looking for something new. Plus, it would have been a crying shame had the golf club remained closed. I saw it at its worst, but I could see past all the bad flaws because it had charm and it had potential."

Fame can still recall the moment she drove into the car park after purchasing the club on February 19, 2019, only to be greeted by numerous potholes, weeds and a mesh fencing that had almost blown down.

"I felt like a hamster on a wheel for the first week because there were so many things we had to get done," she recalls.

Fame puffs out her cheeks when asked what those changes entailed. "We've done such an awful lot, in such a short space of time, that I could probably write a book," she says, without the merest hint of hyperbole.

"We were stripping walls, ripping up flooring, we ended up rewiring the whole clubhouse... it was quite the introduction to running a golf club for the first time."

Up until that point, Fame was better known for her performances on the course, having competed on the Ladies European Tour and Asian Tour between 2004 and 2009. It was only because of injury that her playing career was cruelly cut short before her 30th birthday.

"I had to retire because I got osteoarthritis in my right shoulder," she explains. "I can still remember to this day feeling physically sick while hitting golf balls due to the pain in my right shoulder. I knew then that there was something really very wrong. I was 29 and literally felt like the rug had been pulled from under my feet. All I knew was golf and so I had to do an awful lot of

Main From its position in the Peak District, Stanedge looks out across four counties.

Below Fame Tate's plan was to create a place that made non-golfers every bit as welcome as its members.



soul searching and seriously reassess my situation."

While she recovered from the first of three shoulder replacements, Fame completed two Open University courses: one in Business and Events Management and one in Health and Fitness Management, and briefly ran corporate hospitality golf days for Faldo Events. She left after six months to set-up the Fame Golf Academy in late 2013, which ultimately led to an ambassadorial role at Derbyshire Golf as a result of introducing more than 250 beginners to the sport.

Despite the many other responsibilities she now has, Fame is still heavily involved in the running of the Academy, which plays a major role in providing a pathway to membership at Stanedge. The club now boasts 260 members of widely differing abilities and has emerged as one of the most forward-thinking clubs in the country due to a combination of shrewd marketing and simple changes.

Above The club was founded in 1931, with just six members.

"Essentially, we've transformed a dead business into something that is thriving. One of the things I'm most proud about is that if you take away 30 of the old members who rejoined, we've effectively captured 230 new people. I always felt we could make a success of it, but we had to hit the ground running because when we started we had no income stream and no members.

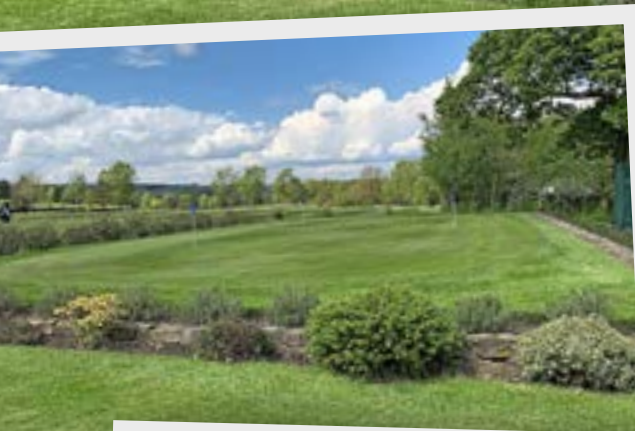
"We had an open day on Easter

Sunday in 2019 which got 100 people through the door. We also started a '6@6 golf league where people paid £6 and played six holes and got a meal after. That ran for 20 weeks. Programmes and ideas like that were a necessity to get us back on the map and make people aware that we are still here."

Had it not been for the pandemic, it's likely Fame would still be running 'learn to play' sessions twice a week and getting involved in campaigns like Girls Golf Rocks. They've all had to take a backseat over the last two years while she's battled to save the business. She makes light of the fact she hired a head greenkeeper a day before the first lockdown, but for a while the financial implications were no laughing matter. There was pressure from the bank and red tape meant she was only able to furlough one of her eight members of staff.

"We were fortunate the pandemic didn't happen in 2019 because that would have killed us. We were lucky we had the support of our members.

'THANKS TO TATE, STANEDGE HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MOST FORWARD-THINKING CLUBS IN THE COUNTRY'



top priority while she tries to create new revenue streams. She's already introduced a pro shop after getting creative with some glass panelling, and rebranded the restaurant and bar as a high-end, separate entity to the golf club in a bid to make non golfers feel welcome.

"I've always said from day one that we are not in direct competition with all the 18-hole courses just a few miles away," she says. "I always wanted to break the tradition of the typical golf club model. That was one of my missions from the outset and why we use the hashtag, 'more than just golf'. I wanted an open, accessible golf club where people could feel comfortable, whether it be playing golf or grabbing a bite to eat. It's now a case of

maintenance and looking after the good things we've done because the last two years have been manic."

It's a sign of Stanedge's incredible transformation that Fame is now struggling to find a place for all the trophies and awards she has won since taking the reins. In addition to

being named PGA Midlands Professional of the Year after completing her PGA Foundation degree, Fame won an Outstanding Achievement accolade at The English Women's Awards (North) and was nominated for the Newcomer Manager of the Year by the GCMA, who presented her with a special commendation award. She is typically bashful about the recognition she has received personally and prefers to focus on Stanedge being shortlisted for Club of the Year in the England Golf Awards 2021 as a by-product of an incredible team effort and culture.

"I feel proud of the team and of what we've accomplished because we pride ourselves on our customer service. We know everyone on a first-name basis. We want our members to feel valued and special. They are not just a number on a sheet.

"We actually reconfigured the layout of the course and changed the hole numbers, just so our elderly members could feel safe on the course. Now there are loops within the 10 holes so people are never far from the clubhouse, and they can pop out for three holes. Little things like that make a big difference.

"Every one of our members is crucial to me and the business. It's run like a business but I want it to feel like home – and that's essentially what we've created. It sounds cheesy, but it feels like we've brought something back to the community."

It's still been extremely difficult because there are no payment holidays on things like machinery and coffee machines. The financial burden has been tough, but the beauty of our team is that there are no roles or responsibilities. Everyone pulls together and everything just gets done."

What sets Stanedge apart from almost every other golf club is that it doesn't look, feel or operate like one, which is precisely what Fame set out to achieve. There are no committees or stuffy dress codes, and Fame is so involved in all areas of the business that she has had to apply for a licence to become a landlady.

For now, the members remain her

Above A 10-hole moorland/parkland course, Stanedge was redesigned to make it easy to nip out to play a quick three holes.

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