



# Powa to the people

It's 30 years since Powakaddy first kick-started the electric trolley market in the UK. To mark the launch of the new Freeway family for 2013, **Dominic Pedler** reflects on the ups and downs of this pioneering British brand and talks with Chairman & CEO, John deGraft-Johnson, now back at the brand he helped build following last year's change of ownership



**T**om Watson would have been oblivious to it as he strode to Open glory at Royal Birkdale, with Alfie Fyles on the bag, in the summer of 1983. But a few yards away in the tented village, a brand new invention was being unveiled that would soon prove a boon for anyone without a professional caddy.

Making its debut was the PowaKaddy Classic, the first commercially released electric golf trolley ever seen in the UK.

Designed by mechanical engineer Joe Catford with the help of his son David, the pair returned from Birkdale that week with a couple of hundred orders for their eye-catching contraption.

Fast forward three decades, three changes of management and some half-a-million worldwide trolley sales, and David Catford is back at the helm of PowaKaddy with John deGraft-Johnson, his business partner from the company's most successful era.

It's certainly been a long and winding road for PowaKaddy in every sense, from initiating the entire sector and enjoying a prolonged monopoly within it, to striving to maintain pole position as the market mushroomed.

The Classic itself saw its first major makeover in 1989, when the heavy welded steel-and-cast-aluminium chassis was replaced with a strong plastic moulding that, overnight, halved the weight of the trolley and scrapped the fiddly take-apart tubular construction.

While that model (renamed the Legend) would continue for another decade, it proved to be a victim of another Joe Catford trolley, The Hill Billy, which first introduced foldability to the electric sector.

Hill Billy is now part of the PowaKaddy group and the two brands enjoy a symbiotic relationship for sharing technologies while remaining distinct products with different price points. Indeed, the origins of today's PowaKaddy range date from the turn of the millennium when the company debuted foldability with their own more robust, contemporary styling, electrics and features. That first Freeway would go on to sell some 385,000 units, the best-selling electric trolley of all time.

Fourteen years on, the 2013 Freeway family is PowaKaddy's first launch since the company's well publicised 2012 takeover, and sports construction and features developed from the 'new' team's combined half-century experience in the market. New styling and chassis materials, improved foldability and various on-board electronics are among the standout features for this season (see Freeway To Heaven sidebar), confirming just how far trolley technology has come since the early days.

Similarly, lightweight and longer-lasting lithium batteries are also transforming our perception of the electric trolley in terms of ease of transport



The world's first electric trolley – the PowaKaddy Classic – made its debut in the exhibition tent at Birkdale during the 1983 Open. Print advertising featuring Peter Alliss quickly established the brand within the UK market and as sales soared PowaKaddy extended its range with the purchase of Hill Billy in 2000. (Opposite): Back at the helm, Chairman John deGraft Johnson (left) and CEO David Catford





# Freeway to Heaven

The world's best-selling trolley for the past decade returns with a major makeover encompassing three models for 2013

## POWAKADDY FREEWAY

**The best selling electric trolley just got even better...**

First up is an all-new **Freeway** with a lightweight, oversized central tube and a soft touch T-Bar handle with a modern sporty look. Like the other models this season, it has a quiet 200w motor, a cutting-edge key lock system that holds cart bags securely without twisting, and low profile, five-spoke wheels.

The electrics include a Power on/off LED indicator and a highly practical Pause & Resume function. Also new is the on-course front wheel adjustment and an interchangeable built-in battery connection for both standard and lithium batteries.

**Buyer's guide: £369.99 (standard battery) and £399.99 (extended range battery). Available in black.**

## POWAKADDY FREEWAY DIGITAL+

**Control and information at your fingertips...**

With its robust oversize frame and sporty wide wheels the **Freeway Digital +** essentially upgrades last season's Freeway Digital.

Notably the T-Bar handle with built-in nine-speed control roller, fully-integrated LED display screen and electronic digital distance function. Other features include PK's effortless three-way folding mechanism; as well as the new battery tray, bag grip and Key Lock system which, when used with any Powakaddy cart bag, restricts all lateral movement. Available in black and white frame options.

**Buyer's guide: £429.99 (standard lead-acid Battery), £459.99 (extended range battery) and £579.99 (lithium battery).**

## POWAKADDY FREEWAY SPORT

**State-of-the-art flagship model of the range**

A sporty construction combining strong and lightweight materials with a three-way, no-fuss folding mechanism that suits the smallest of car boots. As well as the 200w motor, ergonomic soft grip handle, 9-speed controller and LCD display screen there's a separate button to access the Digital Distance Function.

Other features include a battery life monitor, digital clock, universal bag stay and soft grip pads suitable for all bag types.

**Buyer's guide: £479.99 (standard battery with black or white frame), £509.99 (extended range battery), £679.99 (lithium battery with additional graphite frame option); £729.99 (lithium EBS with graphite frame).**

For more details visit:  
[www.Powakaddy.com](http://www.Powakaddy.com)



The multi-function handle with digital display – as standard on the Freeway Sport



Powakaddy operates from this headquarters in Sittingbourne, Kent. Parts are sourced across the world, with all Powakaddy products assembled in the UK

and convenience, while prices are falling to a point where the upfront premium over bulky lead-acid is more clearly justified by lithium's longer-term value for money.

Powakaddy remains the dominant brand but the company's electric empire keeps steadily expanding. For while Hill Billy continues to enjoy its own niche, the new owners also bring to the table the expertise and patents of EZiCaddy, the brand they established in 2010.

With technology sharing between the three brands, along with economies of scales when sourcing components, the group looks set to continue its illustrious heritage, as we reflect with Chairman & CEO, John deGraaf-Johnson.

**Gi: From a standing start, how has the electric trolley market grown over these three decades?**

By 1990 there were around 50,000 trolleys out there - which was still less than 1% of the six million golfers in Europe - even after the first seven years. Since then, the market has grown some ten-fold, to the point where about 1 in 10 golfers now own an electric trolley. 75% of world sales are still in the European market so there's still great worldwide potential.

**Gi: Powakaddy had a virtual monopoly in the '80s and '90s. How has competition changed the market for you and the consumer?**

We had over a 70% share until the turn of the millennium when competition increased as new brands emerged. It's great for the consumer who now has more options and more competitive prices. The new companies have also helped grow the whole market and raised awareness among golfers. Of course, we've had to work harder to maintain our position.

**Gi: Electric trolleys used to be associated exclusively with older golfers. When did the image change and the product become 'cool'?**

In the mid 1990s there was a growing awareness of





On a pedestal: The all-new 2013 range (from the top) includes the Freeway – the best-selling electric trolley of all time – the Freeway Digital + and Freeway Sport





Evolution of a classic: the 2013 Powakaddy models – including the top-of-the-range Sport enjoyed by the England team – owe their heritage to a long line of notable designs, including the RoboKaddy, unveiled in November 2001, and the award-winning Powakaddy Touch

the medical benefits – for all ages – of using a trolley rather than carrying. In that sense, it has become a game improvement product. Racier styling over the last decade and the rise of various electronic gizmos have also helped to appeal to a younger market.

**Gi: Reliability has been perceived as an issue down the years, for trolleys in general. How have Powakaddy's rates of returns and repairs declined, and what areas have improved most?**

Batteries used to be the main problem – either not lasting for at least a year or, occasionally, failing half way around the golf course. Some years, returns were over 5%. These days, batteries are much more reliable, with 2% returns, or better. Another landmark has been the shift from mechanical potentiometers to electronic encoders as a way of controlling trolley speed. These are at least six times more reliable. Our overall failure rates on trolleys have now

come down to around 1%.

**Gi: How important is the fact you assemble in the UK and Powakaddy's British branding?**

The British element is in respect of design and assembly – though we do employ many Chinese components – as well as our after-sales service. Consumers do like to feel that we are supporting UK industry and a condition of the new owners' purchase of Powakaddy was to retain the British element and keep the employees on. Ultimately, our reputation has been built on delivering quality, functionality, innovative technologies and performance. And we've tried to take these core values to the next level with the new Freeway family.

**Gi: What are your favourite design highlights of the 2013 Freeway family?**

We are particularly pleased with the way it folds and also the 'pause and resume' functions. These are the essential practical features that make the trolleys easy to operate and enjoyable to use. I, personally, am a gizmo man so I like all the latest displays and timers [such as on the PK Freeway Sport]. But we've carefully designed them to ensure they are very simple to use.

**Gi: Powakaddy has always been known for its innovation, but why did ideas such as radio control and the Touch handle not catch on as expected?**

The radio controlled RoboKaddy [of the late 1990s] was a great concept with valid technology – and it actually proved quite popular in the US. But it had issues: there were accidents with people showing them off in car parks and driving them into cars. And many golfers, anyway, prefer to keep the trolley close to hand. The Touch was dropped, prematurely in my opinion, by a nervous management team because of early teething problems. But many people still regard it as a great concept and we may well revisit it.

**Gi: The company also went through a rocky stage in 2006 with the P5 model under a previous management team.**

The P5 was rushed to market. The key to gauging the failure rate for any product is to launch it slowly and 'debug' quietly and efficiently as you go along. Some 50,000 units were put out before the realisation that the failure rate was nearer 10% than 1%. The cost of resolving it proved too great.

**Gi: How important is the tie up with the PGA and England Golf; and to have names like Oli Fisher and Tom Lewis associated with the brand?**

We feel it's important to support the industry. Powakaddy has a history of partnerships – both at the playing end and the commercial end. We're proud that the PGA and England Golf are happy to be associated with us.

**Gi: What's the Tomorrow's World for electric trolley design?**

We've looked at several futuristic designs. Golfers can expect trolley frames inspired by sophisticated racing bikes, with cool shapes justified by structural reasons as well as fashion. We're already seeing this with oval, or elliptical, tubes which make much stronger frames than conventional circular tubes. Materials will also improve: just as we've gone from steel to various grades of aluminium, we'll see more graphite which can be more easily manipulated, allowing trolleys to get lighter and with even better foldability. 

