

Master-planning your course and the sell to members

This issue has been reproduced by JBAS, first authored and published by Jeff Blunden in October 2005.

There are few topics that can extract the same level of passion in the field of golf course architecture as the Club master-plan. An ideal that is close to the hearts of many of us 'closet architects' who have remodelled holes in our minds as we walk fairways, concluded that a bunker was in an unusual place, moaned about a swale on a green, or complained of a pin placement.

Thankfully many of our thoughts remain just that and there are people out there who do this work for a living - the professionals from related disciplines (such as architecture, land planning and engineering) and those, who together with a great understanding of the game, are the most qualified to do so, the golf course architect.

One of the ways that we have educated ourselves about course design and the general architecture challenge is via the series of books published by one of Australia's foremost golf writers, Paul Daley titled "Golf Architecture – A Worldwide Perspective."

Paul's concept ("a gathering of contemporary international assessments of the golf architecture industry") gives the reader a broad introduction to many topics and enables them to see design issues through an architect's eyes. Paul has recently completed and published the Volume 3 in the series and as the book is a great read and would look good under many a Christmas tree or your bookcase we are happy to give it a free plug – You can contact Paul on fswing@bigpond.net.au to order a copy. (If you mention this article he will do you a postage inclusive deal of \$69.95.)

The Australian Golf Industry Report – 2004 reported that a number of clubs are currently contemplating some form of course works, be it new holes or extensions to existing holes. Given these findings, we thought it appropriate to include an article in this newsletter that introduces the course master-plan concept, an often controversial document in most club. The article highlights how to sell these changes and the concept of a master-plan to your membership. The reason for mentioning Paul Daley's book is that he has graciously allowed us to précis an article written by Tom Paul and Paul Richards that is in the recently published Volume 3 which addresses this very issue. We have tweaked it a little in order to clearly and succinctly present the message and added some Australian context but the original theme of the original article is still intact.

A master-plan – Why?

Both golf-course renovation projects and master-planning for the future of golf courses are relatively recent phenomena, something that was virtually unknown even ten or fifteen years ago. It's quite safe to say that most club members have not been involved in such a process before.

The essential reason for the development of a master-plan is to ensure that despite the ever evolving nature of club boards, committees, superintendents and management and the varied opinions of those individuals, a clear vision is set in place so that changes to the golf course are part of a preconceived and considered plan, not ad-hoc decisions made without the overall context in mind.

A pattern seen at many courses is a variety of architects, greens committees, boards and other decision makers redesigning, tampering with, and altering original designs. In many cases this has resulted in a lack of continuity from hole to hole, from bunker to bunker, and even sometimes from tee to green on a golf hole. In addition, bunkers may have been removed or added, original bunker shaping may have been lost after years of play and greens are likely to have become smaller and more circular due to lazy mowing patterns over time. Tees are also likely to have become smaller and rounder, some relocated, removed or added, with the result sometimes being an entirely altered playing strategy. The general aim of a master-plan is to fix all of these past ills, with the plan giving guidance to the members and successive boards and committees as to their course's future direction.

how to plan it.

The first step in this project is the assembly of a master-plan committee. The committee should represent the important constituencies of the membership and include a cross-section of playing abilities without becoming too cumbersome in size. Committee members should have some working knowledge of golf-course architecture, agronomy and maintenance practices.

The committee should begin by creating a master-plan mission statement to be submitted for board approval. This should be done after thoroughly researching the history and heritage of their golf course and its architect. The committee should begin by inviting expressions of interest from those architects who have either been involved with the renovation of courses built by your original architect or those who have completed work with similar themes to your course. Due diligence requires a thorough investigation of the architects' work, reputation and how the changes have been perceived by its membership, as well as by outsiders. Have this discussion with those responsible for the process at these other clubs. Find out what worked for them, what did not work, what pitfalls were faced and what they learned. Detailing then deciphering this information will help you choose the proper specialist and will pay off immeasurably as you proceed.

After you have chosen your master-planning architect, the master-plan committee should ask that person to create their own plan that adheres to the club's mission statement. When the architect has completed the plan, the master-plan committee should meet with the architect to review the plan in a detailed hole-by-hole manner. The architect should explain to the committee the logic of the architectural changes — both in look, and in fact. After the plan has been agreed upon by the architect, the committee and then reviewed by the Board, it should be presented to the membership for their assessment and feedback

how to sell it.

The second part of the process is the 'selling' of the master-plan to the membership. This part of the process is as critical as the development of the master-plan, itself. Indeed, it is every bit as important to the protection of the course's architecture in the future. The master-plan committee and the Board must anticipate that almost automatically there will be resistance to the project. A large segment of the membership will simply be opposed to change of any description, while others will merely object to spending money on golf-course-related projects. These are the standard issues, of initial resistance.

The first specific issue of resistance to a master-plan that one can expect is trees, namely, their removal and management. Many of the lower handicappers in the club will be concerned about the course becoming too easy while the higher handicappers will claim it will somehow make the course too hard. The rule of the game here is to not panic and lose heart.

We asked renowned Australian golf course architect Tony Cashmore about this, given his 30 years of course master-planning experience. Tony commented, "Most club members love trees and the mere suggestion that even a couple should be removed is frightening — even though in the context of the golf course this number is insignificant." He confirmed that the key is to not become adversarial with the membership in general, or any member in particular, during the initial presentation of the master-plan and to reaffirm that a golf course is a growing living entity and that over time, tree removal — and replacement — is an essential part of that process.

The dual keynotes at this stage of the master-plan project are respect for the opinions of the membership and adopting a calm and logical program of education of the membership on the common sense of the plan. Offer the assurance that this process will also prevent the piece-meal tampering that so many courses have experienced in the past, as revolving golf and green committees have operated without the guiding and stabilising influence of a master-plan.

There is a long list of specific issues and concerns that typically arise within the membership of any club presented with a master-plan. It includes trees; bunkers; green speed; green slopes and contours; easier versus harder; the contrary desires of high handicappers and low handicappers'; and aesthetics, to name but a few. Again, these issues are remarkably similar from club to club. Given others have inevitably learned from their experiences, any club contemplating a master-plan should seek out their peers. They can show and explain what they have done, including the mistakes they have made, as well as their successes.

The education process that the committee must undertake with the membership cannot be underestimated. A good starting point is a survey of the entire membership concerning their likes/dislikes of the course, as it exists beforehand. Use the survey results to help your 'selling program'. The use of open membership meetings, presentations by the architect and other experts, brochures and other mailings to explain the process, plus course walks, are all things the committee must do to successfully 'make the sale'.

In regard to the sale process Tony Cashmore added "part of the selling process is the preparation of a clear, professionally prepared plan that graphically describes the recommended course changes and –importantly – the reasons. Prepared as an overlay to an aerial photograph for example, members can clearly see the layout as it is, and the proposed changes. The importance of a coloured, clear and concise graphical presentation can excite the membership and with today's computer technology there is really no excuse for poor quality drawings".

In summary, to ensure a quality master-plan for your club, the name of the game is first to reach out and discover what others have done before you. Find and hire an architect who has a track record with courses that have successfully undertaken what you contemplate. Research the history of your course's architecture and present that research with a well-conceived mission statement to your architect. Present your master-plan to your membership with sincere respect for their opinions and be sure to educate your membership throughout the process.

As committees and management inevitably change over time, the final point is perhaps the most important. Lock-in your master-plan with the addition of a by-law that protects it. This way the membership will have to be called upon to approve any potential future interference.