

HUMBLE HERO

In the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, a golf course has emerged with expansive vistas matched only by the community spirit that built it.
By Tony Webeck

IF IT is said that it takes a village to raise a child, then the good folk of Maleny in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland have shown that against seemingly insurmountable odds a community can raise a golf club.

Free of pretention and built from the ground up by those who will grace its fairways for the foreseeable future, Maleny Golf Club is a triumph not simply for the golf it has created but the people it has united. A 20-year labour of love that has endured many days of frustration and sleepless nights for former president Dr Max Whitten, Maleny will be an 18-hole golf course by late December with a collection of holes placed delicately within the existing landscape, land that was bought for the people of Maleny for use as community recreation.

It is this caveat in such challenging economic conditions that shapes to be Maleny's greatest strength. A walking trail surrounds the course and leads directly into the charming township; the course itself has been used as the host venue for the Queensland and National Cross Country Championships and abutting what will be the second fairway is Maleny Bridge Club, public park, and future site of



playing fields and equestrian centre.

The golf club is even open at night for the use of astronomy buffs eager to use its elevated locale, and minimal light pollution, to look deep into the dark sky above.

“It shouldn’t be this good,” says former tour professional Wayne Perske, a former resident of Maleny who was lured back last December to perform the dual role of head professional and general manager.

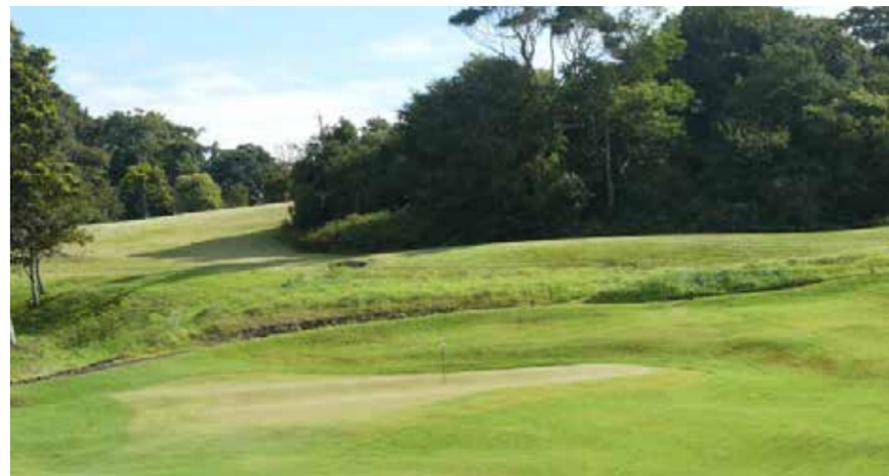
“Max has been unrelenting in his determination to see this club come to light, but everyone who walks through these doors is willing to contribute. Surveyors, engineers, farmers, tradies – this course could not have been built without so many people lending a hand.

“When the final holes are opened, this golf course and maintenance facility will have cost about \$1.6 million and members will be left with a challenging but fun golf course

and no debt whatsoever. Given the budget restrictions, Graham Papworth did an amazing job with the design and he bought right into the spirit of what we were trying to create here.”

Originally engaged by Sunshine Coast Regional Council to incorporate a golf course design within what was the Maleny Community Precinct masterplan in November 2009, Papworth soon became aware of the challenges Maleny Golf Club faced over the previous decade to even reach that point.

“Under normal circumstances, someone would have given up on that job,” Papworth says matter-of-factly. “They had so many obstacles in their road in terms of approvals and conditions that were put on the project, but Max doesn’t take a backward step. He was definitely the driving force behind that course.”



THE THEORY OF 'PROBABLE USEFULNESS'

When Max Whitten’s great-great-grandfather arrived in Australia almost 200 years ago, there was a space on the immigration form titled ‘Probable Usefulness’. That would become the title of a book detailing the Whitten family ancestry and the mantra by which Max has mobilised the Maleny community.

Elevated to the position of president by default when the interim president moved to Victoria in 2001, Whitten stepped down in September with the end of a 19-year journey in sight. He has stepped only so far as the vice-presidency at this stage and concedes there were times when establishing an 18-hole golf course in Maleny faced seemingly insurmountable odds.

“In 2010 we had a meeting with council officers and they wanted us to shift some tees because of the wetland, which also meant a green had to be shifted,” Whitten tells AUSTRALIAN GOLF DIGEST. “I said, ‘If that’s what you want, we’re pulling out.’ They backed off at that point but there have been plenty of other obstacles. Last year we had only \$225,000 from council to build the last six holes, so I put in a bid to Sport Australia for \$200,000, I put in a bid to state government for \$150,000 and \$35,000 to the State Gambling Fund. On Christmas Eve I got knocked back by all of them. I kept that to myself until after Christmas.

“Because of the demand, there was a second round of grants issued by Sport Australia for those who had missed out. In February I got a call from our local politician who said, ‘I’ve got some good news for you; you got your \$200,000.’

“There were a few occasions when it got tough, but I used to tell people to go home



“ THIS COURSE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN BUILT WITHOUT SO MANY PEOPLE LENDING A HAND – WAYNE PERSKE

and get some sleep and I’d lie awake and worry about it.”

When course construction began in March 2014, the club hired former Headland Golf Club course foreman Mick McCombe to oversee the works and he quickly bought in to the Whitten philosophy of ‘probable usefulness’. Initially, McCombe ‘was it’. But now with only two full-time greens staff under him, he has harnessed the power of an army of volunteers to perform a variety of tasks including mowing fairways and greens and building rivetted bunker faces with 80,000 mats of unwanted synthetic turf, cut to size by hand. They even built him a maintenance shed.

“We had a plumber, we had a builder, we had a tiler, electrician – they all came and did their bit for nothing. It was incredible and saved us so much money,” recalls McCombe, who was awarded the AGCSA’s Excellence in Golf Course Management award in 2016 after the completion of the initial nine holes.

“When I first started, I told Max that I couldn’t deal with so many people and he said I had to train people to train people. That’s always stuck with me. I taught guys how to run mowers and now they’re teaching their mate to run that same mower. All I’ve got to do is to try to direct that energy.

“A few Saturdays ago I came in to mow the

greens and when I looked back there were 10-15 walkers on the trail, the Lighthouse Brigade were on the western side doing their opening ceremony, the course was full of golfers; it was really incredible to see everyone using the space. It’s really turned into something different than what I thought it was going to be.”

WILD AND FREE

Save for some sites in Japan not suited for golf in the first place, the Maleny golf course boasts the most dramatic topography Graham Papworth has ever worked on. Responsible also for the designs at Noosa Springs and Lynwood Country Club among many others, Papworth had budgetary and environmental restrictions to navigate yet had just enough space and landscape features to design 18 dramatic, fun and visually pleasing golf holes.

“It was pretty fortuitous, really,” Papworth admits. “There is just enough difference in shapes and enough room to be able to effectively utilise the ridges and then the flatter parts of the cross slopes and some of the valleys. If it was a little bit smaller you’d struggle to fit 18 holes, but it was just big enough to do that. It’s pretty unusual to get a design on a site like that.

“We couldn’t afford to do much in the way of earthworks but we didn’t really want to because the ground was generally such that we were able to work with the existing contour, especially the green sites. Most of those sit on the natural ground. That’s what made it quite as different and as picturesque as it is, just being able to flow with the contours that are there. There was enough variety from one corner of the property to the other so that each hole was quite different. It was an exciting site to work on.”

When the final six holes are completed and in play, Maleny will open with a mid-length, downhill par 3 before a broad, sweeping par 5 on the western-most side of the property. A wonderful opening trio is rounded out by a short par 4 with three distinct green sections before moving on to a three-hole pocket in the south-western corner. The front nine closes with a lengthy, roller-coaster par 4 and holes 11 and 12 play either side of a wetland that adds to the Scottish Highlands feel the club is trying to create.

Long rough well wide of the playing corridors will enhance that links look and deliver what will ultimately be a golf course the people of Maleny will have to share with golfers from far and wide, fond of the game’s earliest traditions. Exactly the spirit in which the club was founded in the first place. 🏌️

THE DETAILS
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