



Maleny Golf Club as it was in September 2014 shortly after Mick McCombe assumed the role of course superintendent

# From paddocks to pars

The development of Maleny Golf Club in the Sunshine Coast hinterland is a unique story. A community driven project, the course is a shining example of what can be achieved with a limited budget and a group of committed and persistent individuals. Integral to its ultimate success has been course superintendent Mick McCombe, winner of the 2016 AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award, presented in partnership with Rain Bird.

**RAIN BIRD**

To meet Mick McCombe for the first time you are immediately struck by his laid back personality and easy going nature, a product no doubt of growing up in one of the most remote corners of Australia. Originally from Gove in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, McCombe's interest in turf was ingrained as a kid where he would spend countless hours in the backyard of the family home mowing pitches and honing his cricket skills.

It was therefore a natural progression when as a teenager McCombe took on a turf management apprenticeship at Pine Rivers Bowls Club a few clicks north of Brisbane. Loving it so much, McCombe ended up spending 10 years on the hybrid couch rinks before embarking, as many young Australians do, on a two-year working holiday to the UK. After interning at the likes of Coombe Hill Golf Club in southwest London, McCombe returned home to take on a role at Bribe Island Golf Club before joining the crew at Headland Golf Club as foreman. It was his two years there, under superintendent Ben Tilley, that would ultimately set McCombe on the path to a small Sunshine Coast hinterland golf course at Maleny and one of the most challenging yet rewarding chapters of his career to date.

Situated about 35 minutes due west of Caloundra and 450m above sea level, Maleny is a township of around 5000. From a dairy farming and timber industry background, the area has more recently become a haven for alternative lifestyles and retirees and is a popular destination for tourists and day-trippers from Brisbane. A strong sense of community prevails in Maleny and it is ultimately this, together with well-focused local support, that ultimately saw Maleny Golf Club come to fruition.

The history behind the development of the golf club is a long and protracted one. The course is part of the Maleny Precinct, which represents a large parcel of undulating land north of and overlooking the township. Back in 1995, then local authority Caloundra City Council purchased 'Armstrong farm' (now part of the precinct) essentially for the disposal of treated effluent water but with a longer term view of it becoming public open space. The land was rezoned in 1997 from 'rural' to 'sport and recreation' with the intention that it was also to be used for a community golf course.

The Maleny Golf Club (sans golf course) was incorporated in 2000 and after extensive consultation made a request to the council that the land be used for an 18-hole community golf course. Not long after, the council approached the owner of the adjacent 'Porter farm' with the prospect of combining the properties to form the 126 hectare Maleny Precinct. Settlement on this second land parcel was delayed until 2006, but broader consideration of potential uses for the combined site began in August 2003

with the formation by the council of the Maleny Precinct Task Force.

After a series of complex and unfortunate delays, the council released a draft master plan for the precinct in August 2007 for community consultation. As a result, as many as 30 sports, recreation, service and other community groups united as the Maleny Precinct Action Network to contribute to the plan. This resulted in amendments to the golf course layout and the inclusion of playing fields and a variety of other sporting facilities that could ultimately be serviced by a shared clubhouse.

An amended master plan was approved by the council, subject to a number of conditions, in November 2007 and it wasn't until August 2008 that it was ultimately endorsed, this time by Sunshine Coast Regional Council which was the new authority following a series of local government amalgamations. The final precinct master plan was completed in mid-2009 and with that GNP Golf Design (Graham Papworth) was engaged to come up with an 18-hole layout.

Detailed plans for the front nine holes, incorporating a driving range, were submitted as part of a DA in July 2011 and after a number of amendments were made, in early March 2014 the club finally got the green light to start construction. (For more on the history of the development and the course design process, read Graham Papworth's detailed article 'Sense of community' that appeared in Volume 17, 2015 of Golf Architecture journal).

## MAKING A MARK

From the outset, all parties involved in the Maleny development were aware of the emphasis for a positive environmental and low cost outcome for the golf course. A driving philosophy throughout the project was 'golf as it was', drawing inspiration from Machrihanish Dunes in Scotland. Papworth's design did just that, taking advantage of an undulating parcel of land which boasted deep, well-draining volcanic red soil covered by kikuyu pastures, locating tee and green sites that slotted in naturally with the terrain.

Through the committed efforts of the Maleny community and the expertise of course superintendent Mick McCombe, Maleny Golf Club opened its front nine in June 2015



2016 AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award winner Mick McCombe



It quickly became apparent to McCombe upon his arrival that the shaping of the 1st green complex was not representative of the proposed finish grades. It, along with a number of other greens already shaped, had to be deconstructed down to the base

In addition to the environmental benefits of such a philosophy, this *modus operandi* captured the social benefits of drawing on the substantial expertise and good will of the community that had fallen in behind the project and also ensured costs would be kept down.

At the time, the club had intended on recruiting a greenkeeper after the completion of construction and turfing of all playing surfaces – tees and fairways with the existing kikuyu turf and the greens with Tifdwarf stolons sourced from greens renovations at Beerwah Golf Club. However, the club bit the bullet and wisely recruited McCombe as course superintendent in August 2014 a month before they were due to stolonise the first greens. McCombe was recommended for the role by Tilley who had been heavily involved in the Maleny development over the years in an advisory capacity.

When McCombe arrived at Maleny, the pump house and irrigation system had been installed (with the exception of ring mains and sprinklers around greens) and bulk earthworks completed on all but two greens. Thus, McCombe's intended role was to oversee the grow-in of the greens, solid turf the tees and shape and groom the fairways and roughs from the existing kikuyu pastures.

Prior to McCombe's employment, the club had used volunteer engineers and contractors during the initial construction phases. It quickly became apparent to McCombe upon his arrival



that the shaping of the 1st green complex was not representative of the proposed finish grades. It therefore became a delicate and tactful exercise to explain to the club that there were significant errors and that to achieve Papworth's vision the green site would need to be considerably altered.

The club took on board that advice and McCombe oversaw the deconstruction of the green, removing the sand and gravel layers and flat-pipe drainage before reshaping the base. All other greens and surrounds (in particular on holes 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9) were also revisited by McCombe with most sub-bases requiring adjustment, in some cases up to 200mm. He also redesigned the ring irrigation and sprinkler layout for all greens to ensure effective distribution uniformity.

The first four greens were propagated using Tifdwarf stolons from Beerwah and, once established, scarifyings from those were used to stolonise the remaining greens. As Mother Nature has a habit of doing, she intervened during the grow-in when Cyclone Marcia battered the Queensland coast in February 2015. Having just pulled the growth covers off the 2nd green the week before, Maleny copped more than 400mm which caused substantial washouts across the course. That set back some of the greens, but despite a few thin areas the official opening of the front nine holes went ahead on the last day of June 2015.

Total spend for the nine holes was approximately \$750,000 including greens irrigation and maintenance equipment that hadn't already been donated. \$450,000 came from the Sunshine Coast Regional Council's capital works programme and the balance by way of donations. The end result is a golf course that has become a real asset for the community and in the year since opening McCombe has been striving to present the course in as best condition as possible with the modest resources at his disposal.

### COMMUNITY EFFORT

When McCombe started at Maleny there was no maintenance shed and the machinery available was more than rudimentary. There was no greens mower, no bunker rake, an old Fiat two-wheel drive tractor with a slasher and flail mower, one old six-foot Toro rough mower and an antique Toro five-reel fairway mower. While that inventory has improved now that the course is open, the biggest asset at McCombe's disposal is a large group of willing volunteers.

As mentioned earlier, at the heart of the Maleny development has been the community and despite the club being cash poor it has more than made up for it in what club president Max Whitten describes as "significant social capital". Many individuals have invested heavily in the project, whether at the outset by driving the initial development through council or getting their hands dirty during the construction, grow-in and subsequent day-to-day maintenance of the course.

The volunteers come from all manner of professional backgrounds – senior engineers, surveyors, mechanics, electricians, plumbers, builders and, in the case of Whitten, a retired scientist – who have been called upon to assist with almost every conceivable tasks. Along the journey they have tackled specific projects such as building access bridges and rock retaining walls and have also turned their hand to solid-turfing tees, stolonising greens and spreading amendments by hand!

One of McCombe's greatest strengths, aside from his greenkeeping nous, has been his ability to harness the energy of and guide this enthusiastic band of volunteers, identifying leaders who can do specific tasks and motivating the group as a whole. His ability to engage the local community to take ownership of the course combined with the rapport he has fostered with the volunteers has resulted in a golf course that the whole community can be proud of. It's ultimately this that has been one of the most rewarding aspects of McCombe's involvement.

"Through his hard work and total dedication between September 2014 and the official course opening in June 2015, Mick inspired and motivated our eclectic army of volunteers, and our few contractors, to achieve this good outcome," says president Whitten. "The engineers, surveyors, mechanics and other skilled volunteers now have a greater appreciation of what constitutes a fine

golf course. Mick has trained a cohort of committed volunteers to operate our expanding arsenal of machines and also supervised the recruitment and the ongoing training of a hardworking and capable apprentice Marc Kearney.

"Mick has led by example, skill, relevant knowledge, extensive experience and hard work. He has earned and enjoys the full confidence of the club's management committee, its various sub-committees and members. This respect stems from the positive outcomes achieved by our affable and unassuming course superintendent."

### DESERVED ACCOLADES

On a personal level, seeing what were essentially sprawling weed-infested kikuyu paddocks transformed into high quality turf surfaces has been a defining moment in McCombe's turf management career. Without losing sight of all the practical constraints of budget, equipment and skills of volunteers, McCombe has strived to achieve the very best outcomes for the club both in construction and turf management.

The proof of this lies in the quality of the course and its presentation. Feedback from visiting superintendents and greenkeepers, professional and amateur golfers, members and visitors alike has been extremely positive according to Whitten.

"In the 19 months since Mick was recruited to a construction site, we now have the first nine holes of



Just some of the 'local' challenges McCombe has to face after cows from a neighbouring property left their mark on the 5th green

## THE BEST WAY TO DRAIN YOUR COURSE!

### Megaflo- Panel Drain System

Megaflo panel drain provides the dimensional stability and proven structural strength for quick, effective subsurface drainage.

The trenchless option of Megaflo laid directly onto the subgrade results in significant savings in man-hours and material compared to traditional round pipe.

Regardless of the subgrade soil type, all golf courses can benefit from improved drainage using Megaflo.

Megaflo is manufactured from recycled HDPE.

Works well in bunkers, greens, tees and anywhere else you need to drain water from your course.

All connection fittings available:  
Y Join - T Piece - End Outlet - Side Inlet - End Cap

Visit our website or contact your  
David Golf Rep for more information

1300 790 890 | [www.davidgolf.com.au](http://www.davidgolf.com.au)



Maleny's 2nd green (above) as it looked at the opening in June 2015 and right how it looked four months earlier after Cyclone Marcia dumped 400mm on the course



a first class community golf course which is being favourably commented on by members, visitors and the media," says Whitten.

"The challenge for Mick on taking up his appointment at Maleny was to ensure that the course was constructed to the specifications of Graham Papworth and to produce and manage a high quality community golf course with minimum resources. He has achieved that and is now engaged in design work for the maintenance facility and the second nine holes on top of his substantive job of maintaining the course with one apprentice and voluntary labour.

"On a personal level, Mick has continued to mature as a leader and superintendent. He

One of McCombe's greatest strengths has been his ability to harness the energy of and guide an enthusiastic band of volunteers who have tackled a huge range of projects from building rock retaining walls to solid-turfing tees



is good at seeking and benefiting from advice from all quarters. With his hands-on disposition, a positive outcome is that Mick is now a well-regarded greenkeeper within the Maleny Golf Club and among his turf management peers, and is well positioned to play a leading role in the completion of the 18-hole course."

McCombe's efforts have certainly not gone unnoticed by the industry and earlier in 2016 he was bestowed the GCSAQ Superintendent Achievement Award at the Queensland Golf Industry Awards. That qualified him for the AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award, presented in partnership with Rain Bird, which he ultimately went on to collect at the recent 32nd Australian Turfgrass Conference in Melbourne.

In his acceptance speech a very humble McCombe paid tribute to the many volunteers who had assisted him in delivering a quality golf course for the Maleny community: "Starting at Maleny Golf Club some two years ago I never dreamt I'd have my work recognised in such a manner," says McCombe of the award. "Our achievements at Maleny would not have been possible without the great work from our committee and management team and I would like to especially thank president Max Whitten and greens director Rob Bailo who helped me no end to achieve all my goals.

"Myself and apprentice Marc Kearney are the only paid green staff on course so most tasks are undertaken by a great group of volunteers whom I can't praise enough. Thanks to the regular Monday and Friday team members, with special mention to Geoff, David, Roly, Bob and Brian who take on any turfing, weeding or rock wall building needed. Thanks also to Tom Bertwistle and John Pottage for their attention on fairways, Chris Pottinger and Barry Retschlag in the roughs, Alan Ward in the bunkers and last, but certainly not least, John Hay, John Hudson, Steve Laurence and Rex Redding who maintain all our equipment.

"Construction of the first nine holes at Maleny has been a massive undertaking and I'm really looking forward to using what I have learned so far to see the full 18-hole course come to fruition."

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ATM wishes to thank Mick McCombe, Graham Papworth, Max Whitten and Ben Tilley for their assistance in putting this article together. 🙌



CONTROL IT FROM ANYWHERE. ALMOST.



### CONNECT WITH THE HUNTER HC WI-FI CONTROLLER WITH HYDRAWISE SOFTWARE™

Manage your irrigation controller from anywhere in the world using your smart device with Hydrowise™ web-based software, or right from the HC's easy-to-use touchscreen. The HC automatically adjusts daily watering schedules based on your local weather to provide maximum water savings while keeping your landscape healthy and beautiful.



RESIDENTIAL & COMMERCIAL IRRIGATION | Built on Innovation®  
Learn more. Visit [hunterindustries.com/hc](http://hunterindustries.com/hc)

**Hunter®**



National Free Call: +1 800 HUNTER  
Toll Free Fax: +1 800-651-680  
[www.hrproducts.com.au](http://www.hrproducts.com.au)  
[hrrsales@hrproducts.com.au](mailto:hrrsales@hrproducts.com.au)



Tel: 1300 856 368  
Fax: 1300 856 369  
[www.nelsonirrigation.com.au](http://www.nelsonirrigation.com.au)  
[info@nelsonirrigation.com.au](mailto:info@nelsonirrigation.com.au)

Suite 7, 202 Ferntree Gully Road, Notting Hill, Melbourne, Victoria 3168  
Tel: +61 3-9562-9918 Fax: +61 3-9558-6983  
Call today for your free Hunter catalogue +1800-811-370