

A ROYAL REVIVAL

Icons deserve respect. So when Royal Melbourne's two championship courses began to suffer terribly in the drought at the turn of the century, the criticism came first in a whisper.

Back in 1998, when the Presidents Cup was staged so successfully on Royal Melbourne's composite course, it would have been inconceivable that the oldest and most revered golf club in Victoria and Australia would soon be in danger of losing its status.

Although the next couple of years were dry, no-one thought the drought would last as long as it did. Those who played on hard and bare fairways back then might have been underwhelmed by the experience but they were prepared to accept seasonal vagaries and figured the courses would soon be back to their best. And with "course presentation" only one aspect of the various golf magazine and website rankings, RM's acclaimed architecture was enough to keep its spot as the number one club.

But by the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, even the club had to admit it was struggling. The lack of rain had exposed the lack of a long-term water conservation solution – and the majestic 36-hole complex got dryer and thinner.

Still its reputation camouflaged its decline but by now the once-magnificent greens were also in poor shape and, inevitably, the whispers grew voice.

The crescendo came early last year when the Golf Digest rankings were the first to ever publish without RM at number one. The irony was that by then the recovery was already well underway.

Of course, Royal Melbourne's struggle was much more serious than winning a magazine poll. Its long-term viability was threatened unless a solution could be found that was not dependent on the drought breaking.

The good news is that the club's decisive action on a) water conservation b) course repair and c) image has been exceptional. Royal Melbourne is back!

Not yet to absolute pristine condition but back in the game. And with the drought broken, the water retained, the grasses growing and the Presidents Cup counting down, it seems inevitable that when the 2012 rankings are released, RM will be back on its pedestal.

WATER CONSERVATION

Royal Melbourne was by no means the only sandbelt club to have been caught out by the drought but without an adequate water storage facility of its own it was particularly disadvantaged by the changing community attitude to water. Previous generations had never imagined that it would become such a scarce and precious resource.

"It was a difficult situation," said Royal Melbourne chief executive Paul Rak. "The club had suffered like everyone else with the drought and looked at options for how they were going to supplement their water. The government had quite a few options - Carrum was going to be a recycle area and everyone was waiting on that but it never quite got there."

The club couldn't wait any longer so in 2007 it built a 38 megalitre lagoon to establish a catching point and then invested in a stormwater harvesting project which collected the precious liquid and pumped it under the east course and into the lagoon. (The club in collaboration with Permeate Partners Pty Ltd, won an award for excellence from Stormwater Victoria.)

Rak, who joined the club as CEO in 2008, said government guidelines required for the water to be cleaned so a bio-retention area was also established. "We also upgraded all our bores and installed a desalination plant to take the salt out of the water," said Rak.

"We now believe we have a good guaranteed water supply."

Until the club could be sure of getting a good supply of clean water there had been no point in renovating the battered fairways and greens. But in 2009 it was able to start the process of restoring RM to its immaculate norm.

COURSE REPAIR

The club had always had a two-grass policy of native couch and poa but that wasn't working in the drought so it trialled Legend Couch on the 6th and 12th holes of the West course.

In monitoring the growth over a 12 month period, the club also observed the same grass in use at Commonwealth and The National and decided to convert all 36 holes as soon as possible to give the courses their chance to shine during the Presidents Cup.

At the same time it decided to replant the greens, sticking with the Suttons Mix which had served the club so well before the drought. But it made a major change in planting fescue around the aprons to act as a buffer between the Legend Couch and the Suttons Mix.

The man responsible for the work was new course superintendent Richard Forsyth. The appointment of Forsyth in March 2009 after the resignation of Jim Porter was an inspired decision. The former Metropolitan super had carved his reputation by turning out Metro in immaculate condition for the 2001 Accenture World Matchplay Championship.

With the Presidents Cup looming, priority for the makeover was given to the holes on the composite course and with a 36-hole complex it meant the RM members were not as disadvantaged during the renovation as single course clubs might have been.

Even so, for about two months there were only 11 holes in play but Rak said there were no grumbles because the worst of the impact came during the Christmas holidays when demand was low and because the members understood the importance of the changes.

The East course was re-opened in February last year and the West followed in March. And then, of course, the drought broke. The outstanding spring and summer growing conditions, which have seen courses throughout Melbourne at their finest for many years, have enabled the new grasses to quickly consolidate and late last year the progress received the warm nod of approval from both Presidents Cup captains Greg Norman and Fred Couples when the club held a media day to show off its facelift.

The Master of the Amateurs tournament in January was evidence of even further consolidation. “The result is that we are delighted where it is at the moment,” said Rak. “We are looking forward to another growing season in September so that by the time the Presidents Cup comes around in November, it will be in pretty good nick. We have come a long way in a very short time.”

IMAGE

Just as Kingston Heath was awarded number one ranked course off the back of the Australian Masters in 2009, Royal Melbourne can regain it off the back of the Presidents Cup. The tournament is the best thing that could happen to the club because everyone will see that the course has recovered and the famed architecture is as grand as ever.

But there have also been some other changes which indicate the club is looking to the future. The successful bid to stage the ever-growing Master of the Amateurs event in January was the chance for a “soft” opening of the course under championship conditions. And the progressive Rak is keen for more widespread exposure of RM’s beauty.

The club has always welcomed VGA and WGV sanctioned junior and senior events and this will continue and perhaps even increase. “It is our responsibility to support golf at all levels,” said Rak.

Should the Australian Masters survive the pounding it took from the PGA’s fixturing for 2011, it is also likely RM will take a turn on the Masters roster.

Another major decision taken by the club – the lease of the Sandringham public access course across the road – it not only likely to prove a sound source of income but has a side effect of making the club even better suited to staging major events. Royal Melbourne was always well placed to bid for tournaments because it could pay for access to the Sandringham. It can now press home that advantage because in June 2010 it took a three-year lease of the 18-hole course, which means it will no longer have to pay massive fees to use the fairways as a car park.

For the rest of the year, Sandringham will improve as a course from the use of Royal Melbourne’s equipment and expertise.

Already arguably the finest public course in the Melbourne suburban area, the benefits were quickly seen after the lease changed hands on July 1. For example, when once it took the Sandringham superintendent five days to spray greens, it now takes only five hours with Royal Melbourne’s spraying machine. “That gives them the chance to do the one percenters like rake bunkers etc,” Rak said.

The decision to lease Sandringham also gave Royal Melbourne a measure of control over what was happening in its neighbourhood. Change was afoot once the former lessee decided not to take up a further five-year option and the club saw numerous advantages in taking over.

Royal Melbourne’s lease was set at three years to give the club and the local council the opportunity to assess the longer term potential of the course and surrounds. But no matter

what happens, it will remain a public course under zoning regulations. At \$26 for 18 holes, it offers exceptional value in the sandbelt.

Rak signalled an increase in junior development through Sandringham, particularly with the appointment of acclaimed teacher Henry Cussell as manager of public course. RM has not wooed many juniors down the years, preferring to pick people on the basis of them becoming good members regardless of their prospects of playing to scratch. And poaching top players from other clubs has, said Rak, not been in the interests of anyone.

The result has been that while the club produced numerous outstanding golfers down the years, such as the Hon Michael Scott and Ivo Whitton, it has not been known as a nursery for stars for many years. As Rak says, Sandringham just might open up a new talent pool.

From 1891, whether at Caulfield, Sandringham or Black Rock, Royal Melbourne has been the social pinnacle of club membership. And since the shift to the Alister Mackenzie designs on the current site in the 1920s, its courses have been the spiritual home of Australian golf.

The changing culture of the game at the grass roots level, the GFC and the drought have all conspired to throw some challenges at the club in recent years. But it has answered them all. The international, interstate and local visitors to the Presidents Cup in November will, no doubt, be agape once more at the majestic icon of Australian golf.