

Plan for the future

Ross Perrett



GOLF Courses are living organisms and therefore are constantly changing. Managing this change is a challenge that every golf club or golfing facility must face, and golf course architects can play an important role in this process. It is surprising, however, that very few golf clubs have a clear plan for their long-term future.

In traditional golf clubs, the leadership and management is constantly changing as the office bearers generally serve for relatively short periods due to the demands of what is usually a honorary position. The Captain is effectively the Chief Executive and is often motivated to leave his/her mark on the course which can lead to unnecessary changes to the course design and management. The changes are well intended but are often short sighted, ad hoc and inevitably have a negative cumulative effect on the course. The Captain is often a respected 'captain of industry' having had a successful career, due probably in large part to having had a clear business plan supported by stable leadership and management with expertise in the particular industry.

Golf clubs deserve the same approach and will benefit from developing and signing off on a long-term vision for the course and setting in place protocols that will ensure the club is constantly heading in a clear direction. Golf Course Architects can assist clubs in developing and documenting a long-term vision for the course and provide independent professional expertise on a range of related technical issues.

There is not a single golf course that cannot be improved, but every golf course is different and requires an individual approach. If all courses were given a thorough health check, some would pass the fitness test with flying colours whereas some would fail miserably and would require a long-term fitness regimen and/or major surgery. Unfortunately, others choose cosmetic surgery which is only a short-term makeover and not sustainable.

In order to rationally assess the current health of a golf course, Thomson Perrett has developed a Course Audit System that provides a comprehensive analysis of all key areas of the course and a logical starting point in a process that leads to the preparation of a Course Masterplan:

1. A Review and Audit of existing conditions.
2. The Identification of the constraints and opportunities to improve the course.
3. Recommendations for improvements and the preparation of a Course Masterplan that formalizes a plan of action.
4. The staged implementation of the Masterplan.

Understanding your course is a fundamental starting point as with any health check. The Audit of existing conditions covers a broad range of topics including the site conditions, course history and heritage, financial resources and staff levels, membership/user profile, course layout, length, bunkering and strategy, external and internal safety, the Clubhouse, car parking and practice facilities, turf and maintenance, irrigation and water management, landscape character and sustainability and miscellaneous topics specific to the facility.



The 18th hole at The National's Ocean Course

Following a careful analysis of the course audit a series of recommendations are discussed with key stakeholders of the club management. This interactive process establishes a clear set of objectives and priorities.

A Golf Course Masterplan is then developed by the Golf Course Architect which formalizes an agreed scope of work and direction for the club. The Masterplan must be 'sold' to the broader golf club in order for it to be adopted as a shared vision and way forward.

For example, when designing The Ocean Course for The National, TWP as the course architects produced a detailed report in consultation with the club which sets in stone the expectations for the ongoing management of the course.

The Implementation phase follows, and requires considerable time, careful planning, professional expertise, money and resources. It is essential that good communication with members and patrons is maintained throughout in order to manage and satisfy

their expectations. Newsletters, 3D computer visualizations, site inspections and regular forums are all beneficial. It's desirable to set achievable milestones that can generate enthusiasm and pride as the course is improved. Word of mouth is a powerful ally.

In summary, every course is capable of being improved. It is recommended that the club engage a suitably qualified Golf Course Architect to undertake a thorough course Audit and to work with the club's management to prepare a Course Masterplan that can be logically staged and funded. At all times the management must communicate and respect the members throughout the process. ◀

Ross Perrett is Managing Director of Thomson Perrett Golf Course Architects, one of the world's premier golf course design companies. Together with Australian legend Peter Thomson, Thomson Perrett has worked on over 250 projects around the globe. They can be contacted on +61 3 8698 8000, or via thomsonperrett.com.au.

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