

DON THOMSON

One of the good things about golf is that it allows ordinary players to do extraordinary things. It's not that this doesn't happen in other sports but in golf the results are more spectacular. Of course the corollary is that the game allows us to do things of a truly awful nature which also remain memorable but for all of the wrong reasons. Now if this introduction seems to be damning Don with faint praise then be patient because you will see that Don is the type of player that helped created the Club in the first place and then guaranteed it is around for you to be a member today. Along the way he did some special things.

His association with the Club began in the early sixties after he stopped playing football for Hallora at age 34. Jack Stroud and Jack Caddy, both of whom became Life members, delivered petrol to Don's farm at Tetoora Rd and suggested to Don that with all of that time on his hands he should give golf a go. Of course being a dairy farmer he didn't have much time on his hands but he did find that he could squeeze a game in between milkings on Saturdays and then Wednesdays. Don's other sporting talent was cricket and so it wasn't surprising he found the new game to his liking. So, after surviving the scrutinizing to which all prospective members were subjected – yes, you could blackball someone in those days – he paid his five pounds joining fee and eight pounds yearly subscription and became a member. He did this with the support of his wife who over the years was remarkably tolerant of his sporting interests.

He was entirely self-taught and in his words, "Nothing but a hacker" but he did reduce his handicap to 13 even without time to practise. Given that the great majority of golfers play off 18, he was definitely more than a hacker. He shared plenty of success. He won three monthly medals the best of which was when he returned a net 65. Phil Adam won't appreciate being reminded but when he returned to the Club House with a 67 he must have felt confident only to be upstaged by Don.

He won a B Grade Championship and, teaming with Jack Dwyer, a truly legendary Club player of the sixties and seventies, won the coveted Jack Stroud 4BBB and finished runner-up several times. In both cases the format was a demanding one - two qualifying rounds followed by quarter, semi and grand final head to head match play. If you survived this then you were entitled to call yourself Champion.

He also won a West Gippsland 4BBB this time partnering one of the Club's best loved figures, Lindsay Rippon. Coming up the 15th Lindsay commented, "I think we'll win this." And they did. Today of course you couldn't possibly get ahead of yourself and say something like this. Imagine if an AFL footballer was heard to say, "We really smashed them and we should win the flag" when there was still six rounds to play. Of course Lindsay was such a fantastic sportsman he was probably entitled to express this confidence.

Don also managed two holes-in-one in his career - on the 14th and the 23rd Naturally he didn't actually see the ball go in the hole. Who does apart from your playing partners? It's probably a defensive mechanism that allows us to say from the tee, "No, that can't be so" or maybe it just heightens the pleasure when we get to the green and find the ball safely deposited at the bottom of the cup.

Graeme Rawson can identify with this. Playing for the Club in Pennant one day at Emerald, Graeme scrubbed the ball up the hill of a par three. Thinking he had hit it out of bounds he hit a provisional. Of course his first ball was exactly where you would expect it to be: at the bottom of the cup.

Don wasn't exactly devoid of this sort of luck. When he started, the course layout was different to what we know it today. The second was a long par three starting approximately half way along the fairway of the current eighth fairway with the green near the current ninth. It was a tough hole and

Don said the only time he ever birdied it was when his ball hit a tree root and ricocheted on to the green close enough to sink the putt.

Incidentally, the first hole had its own charms. It began near the Race Club's saddling ground and then followed a dog leg shape to the green mid-way between the current ninth and eighth. It wasn't just the avenue of trees to be negotiated to get there; it was the very large gum tree about fifty metres from the tee that made it a challenge. Good golfers could find a way round it of course but most found it very easy to hit so the second shot could sometimes be from behind the tee.

The third hole also had its challenges. It was a par five hole that follows the current tenth but was longer. The dam built by Mick DeVries wasn't there then but it was a dog leg for all but the big hitters. So why wouldn't anyone cut the corner and take the shortest route home? Part of the area where most would land their ball was out of bounds. A real risk-reward shot. But think about it. Not on the boundaries but in the middle of the course was an out of bounds area. Lea Caldwell would have had a fit. Golf was different in those days.

When you have been a member for nearly fifty years there are many memories to record particularly of those with whom you played. Two stand out. Lindsay Rippon who was not just a sporting talent - ask Tom Carroll what he was like to partner when opening the batting for Drouin - but also a thoroughly likeable person. His smile made you smile and it is no wonder he was elected as Captain. Tom Flowers was of a similar nature. He had played in cricket and football premierships teams with Don at Hallora so he had form as a sportsman. But just like Lindsay it was the qualities of the man himself that made him stand out. It says something about Don that he counted both as his friends.

Of course there were plenty of other things and naturally yabbie holes and tree roots were prominent. Many a working bee was spent trying to deal with these problems. Of course when the rain fell it then reverted to what it was originally: a swamp. Don remembers playing in gumboots. It is difficult to imagine how he did it but that was how tough it was. Think about that next time you don't venture out on the course because your feet might get wet

Whatever had to be done was done by members. People were rostered to be starters - off both the first and tenth. If you got to the course early, you found the key under the stone let yourself in paid your comp fees and headed off. When kikuyu was sown on the current 21st and 22nd you were encouraged by Jack Dwyer and Stan Anderson to replace your divots by actually placing the runners somewhere else.

The Club was democratic - up to a point. On Digger Days - the name surely says it all - women and youths were banned. No doubt their delicate sensibilities would have been offended by the strong language. Or was it just the men wanting the place to themselves?

The Club was a hive of social activity. People always stayed for the presentation; Friday nights you were expected to lock up if you were last man standing; you booked early for the dinner dances, Club dinners and annual balls. For many the Club was the centre of their social lives.

There aren't too many sports where parents and children can share the same activity; golf is one. Don's son, Phil, has carried on the family tradition and is a member at Drouin. He has had a handicap of nine so is a slightly better golfer than Don. No doubt when father and son shaped up it was a no holds barred contest.

Don has had his extraordinary moments on the golf course and has had wonderful times off the course but that doesn't tell the whole story. When he joined, the Club's future was still in the balance. The Club had a meagre bank balance; the course had sand scrape greens and only fourteen holes; we had to share the Club House of the Race Club; there were no paid employees. When he

retired two years ago the assets had grown to a 27 hole course with room for nine more if wanted, a refurbished Club House and a business that turns over millions a year. Not a bad result for the dozen or so people who attended a public meeting held in 1955 to start the Club. And Don's contribution? Nearly fifty years of active membership, financial support through the debentures that helped finance the land purchase in the eighties and the sponsorship he has offered to the Pro-Am. Don is far too modest to acknowledge this but helping to create the Golf Club is not a bad legacy to have.

Written by George Shand