

THE RACE CLUB

In the mid 2000's, Roger East as Chairman of the Course Development Committee, met with Edwin Batt to sort out a few issues. Batt was the President of the Race Club. Roger began with, "Hello, I'm Roger East" and extended his hand. Edwin replied with, "I'll see you in court." A joke? If so it was a good one because Edwin was a magistrate at the Moe Court. If not then it is a fair summary of the relationships between the two clubs.

It wasn't always this way of course. For the first half century of the two clubs' existences there wasn't a problem. It wasn't until 1955 that they started to share Matthew Bennett Park and then found that golf and racing made uncomfortable bed fellows.

The Race Club was there first. Don Roberts, The Shire Engineer and also a Golf Club committeeman, researched the origins of the Race Club and discovered that the course was cleared of heavy messmate timber and scrub by Davy Brown towards the end of the 19th Century. This was done largely with the help of a horse team, an axe, crowbar and plenty of elbow grease enough to make a five furlong course. Later a grandstand big enough to hold 200 people was constructed in the vicinity of the current 18th green. It was named the Whiskey Creek Racecourse and races were held at least every New Year's Day. The atmosphere no doubt was like that of the current Boxing Day event with good fun, ample liquid refreshment and plenty of betting.

The Club had its problems though and before WW2 went into recess. It might have been the hazardous nature of the track with yabby holes or it might have been the onset of the war and lack of manpower. The grandstand was burnt by tramps and vandals, the rails rotted and the track became overgrown with tussocks. The area was used during the war by the army probably as a jungle training area.

In 1947-8 interest revived. A contour map was prepared and with the help of enthusiastic members a course was constructed that presumably matches the track that we know today.

The early days of the Golf Club were quite removed from all of this. From 1902 until it went into recess during WW2, the Club played on a variety of courses around the district. In 1955 a group of determined citizens held a public meeting to discuss the resumption of the Club. Ironically, in terms of what was to come, this meeting was chaired by the President of the Race Club, Mr Jack Sharky. These people meant business because an earlier motion calling for *investigations* into the possibility of forming a golf club was rejected in favour of a motion calling for the Club to be established again. The site selected was Matthew Bennett Park, the home of the Race Club. Let the war begin.

Hugh Mapleson, father of current player, Bill, served on the Committee from 1961 to 1971 and has chronicled the history from 1955 to 1971 in his account, "The Dust Never Settles." It is a marvellous read with Hughie's personality shining through. He was not a man to mince his words. When the Gas and Fuel Corporation virtually shut the course for three months in 1968 while they attempted to lay pipes for natural gas he had this to say, "The course was difficult to maintain, access to the Northern section was impossible, and much of our employees' time was taken up with arguments with an ignorant crew of loafers who passed as pipeline technicians"

But he reserved his greatest contempt for the Race Club. He refers to them as, "spoilt kids", "continually pin pricking", mounting an "anti-golf campaign" and having to sit across the table to manage the Park as "crossing swords." He was absolutely delighted when, following a Race Club complaint that golf was played on a race day, it turned out to be the race caller and chief steward enjoying a hit before proceedings commenced

He talks of attempts by the Race Club to extend the track by taking over some of the fairways, “with tape measures and little pegs and much verbal activity” He riles at the injustice of, “the Race Club’s building, after being enclosed, lined, rejuvenated by the Golf Club now had a rental value of fifty pounds per year (this is 1962) which the Golf Club had to pay or get out.” This began moves to establish club rooms of our own but this didn’t eventuate until 1967. In the meantime sniping between the two clubs continued unabated.

In 1966 things got so bad that it became a matter of a full debate by the Buln Buln Shire Council. This was after complaints by both clubs about the behaviour of the other. The Gippsland Independent newspaper on 24/3/1966 reported that the Golf Club had complained that a race track chute had encroached on to a fairway and the Race Club complained that “others” had crossed the track without covering it with boards. Cr W Martin was clearly exasperated with the behaviour of both parties and urged that the hatchet be buried and that this bickering did not reflect well on either party. He was right of course although both clubs knew exactly where the hatchet should be buried.

The Independent reported on 28/4/66 that the Coordinating Committee that was supposed to jointly run the Park was to be abandoned and the Shire was to take over responsibility until something better could be put in place. The Race Club in its submission called for the Golf Club to withdraw its activities and purchase a suitable property and establish a proper golf course. Hughie’s blood pressure would have gone through the roof when he read that. He would have had a laugh though when in May the Race Club, in reaction to a Council’s decision, said that, “The Club has no fight with any specific club, only with Council for allowing our activities to be over-run by others.” No fight with any specific club? What about the Golf Club I can hear him bellow?

In the years after Hughie’s premature death the fight largely boiled down to: TREES. As golfers we admire the character and beauty they can bring to a course. Until of course an errant drive finds our ball lodged in their tree roots. Think of the wonderful gum on the 24th. Many claim it as their own but I always think of it as belonging to Jack Gough. A left hander and possessed of a prodigious slice, Jack just about had to hit it. If you asked him before he addressed the ball if he had noticed the tree then he was guaranteed to hit it. Even he didn’t suggest it should be cut down. Or what about the tree in the fairway at Garfield’s 5th? It turns an otherwise simple par 4 into one of the Club’s signature holes. And of course there is the tree on the 17th at Augusta National. When Dwight Eisenhower, WW2 war hero and President of the United States complained, not only didn’t the Committee accede to his wishes but the tree was named in his honour and the story is perpetuated every Masters.

So trees matter. There is an agreement that stipulates that trees be no more than 2 metres in height. While the Race Club would probably agree that trees help drain the swamp which is Matthew Bennett Park, they would say that it is more important that in a race the spectators can see the horses. If you want to know why there is a classic YouTube clip where the racecaller calls a Drouin event blind. In more recent years it has become a Health and Safety issue. Trainers need to be able to see their apprentices at work although sometimes regulations can go overboard. In 2012 Racing Victoria made the Race Club increase the height of the running rails by 50 mm. 50mm is two inches. Public safety you see.

On the other hand, a golf course bereft of vegetation, unless it is a links course, is a bleak sight indeed. Photos of the early days of the course at Mathew Bennett Park amply illustrate that. In Drouin’s case, with a need to attract new members, especially Melbourne members, this became something of real importance.

Peter DeVries, Chairman of Course Development and Frank Cobbledick, curator, with the enthusiastic support of Joe Collins, President, took matters into their own hands. Following expert advice from a horticulturalist and a Forestry officer two thousand trees were planted. The Race Club naturally screamed but what could they do? Their humour would not have been improved if they

got to read the August 1984 newsletter: "Not only will the trees help the layout of the golf course but will help beautify the course and the surroundings which will in turn assist the race folk who will visit to picnic in a pleasant eye catching environment while they have their bet and listen to the metropolitan races on the radio." Tut tut. No mention that there were actual horses racing at Drouin at these meetings.

As the trees grew so did problems. At one stage Frank caught Ralph Hedley, uncle of Club member, Rob, cutting down an offending item. He suggested, well maybe more than suggested, that if Ralph wanted to live perhaps he should desist. Ralph had the last laugh though. When he died, found in his garage were dozens and dozens of tee markers and nearest the pin markers. Over the years he had quietly been "borrowing" them and no doubt chuckling at the Golf Club's frustration.

This sort of conflict continued over many years. Quite recently Tom Carroll when President met with Race Club members to discuss problems with the trees on the 10th. He was actually amenable to suitable trimming but when he received both barrels from a Race Club member he replied that perhaps the Golf Club could no longer afford to cut the race track grass. Strangely, other Race Club members then suggested that perhaps their colleague had been misinterpreted. The trees are still there; we still cut the grass.

There were other issues. Damage, intentional or otherwise, of the greens on race days was a problem. There wasn't much anyone could do to prevent it but the Golf Club bore the consequences. So too was the rubbish left after a meeting. The Race Club didn't have the resources to immediately deal with the problem although they did so eventually. In the meantime it added to the Golf Club's sense of grievance. A fair summary of our attitude was expressed in the December 1982 issue of the newsletter: "It is great to see that common sense has prevailed and that ridiculous monstrosity some member of the Race Club dumped near the Race Course is being dismantled. Can you imagine the skyline with that thing sticking up like a sore thumb?" Do you detect a note of sarcasm here?

It wasn't always bad though. Trainer Mick Randall liked to work his horses off the track which chopped up the area near the 18th green. When this was pointed out to him he was able to adjust to everyone's satisfaction. The Race Clubhouse was used before we got our own premises and then again in 2010 while our new club house was constructed. In 1993 Rex Greenland was able to say, "The cooperation between the Race Club and ourselves is at an all-time high and I hope this sensible approach can be maintained" Unfortunately he didn't explain what went so wonderfully right that year. Perhaps the best result came though when both Clubs combined for a television ad for Fletcher Jones. Does anyone remember this? We should have a copy for our archives.

Generally though the relationship has been fraught and it is usually a matter of peace rather than war breaking out. The Golf Club has certainly found it annoying. The purchase of the land off Fairway Drive was in part an attempt to safeguard the future of the Club if things became untenable at Matthew Bennett Park. At one stage there was some discussion about returning to the Butler property at Buln Buln. It didn't amount to much. Nor did the suggestion that one year when the Race Club was really struggling for numbers that the Golf Club members should join up and stack the meeting. Thankfully that was never more than idle chatter. Can you imagine where that would have ended?

Over the years both clubs have been maintained by very passionate and determined members. It has been hard to see the other's point of view. Golf Club members see a multi-million dollar business supported by about 500 members operating year round and wonder why they should be compromised by basically a once a year event. We want to play in an attractive setting which means beautiful trees. We know that the track is maintained by the Golf Club partly because the race Club does not have the resources to do it year round. However we ignore the social importance that this once a year meeting provides for the town. We forget that the race Club was there first and that

there is an agreement governing the relationship. Trees that obscure the track no doubt pose a safety problem. Doug Clarke, long time Treasurer, is very strong on this point.

Will it ever be thus? Probably, although you might like to reflect on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where the warring families were eventually reconciled. Of course there were bodies aplenty beforehand. Any volunteers?

Written by George Shand