

MICK AND PETER DE VRIES

When we turn up to play our round of golf I wonder how often – if ever – we consider why there is a golf course and club at all. Spend some time with Peter and Mick and you will soon get an understanding. It is people like them who built the Drouin Golf Club which later became the Drouin Golf and Country Club

Mick joined in 1958 and Peter a few years later. In one way or another they have been involved with the club ever since and so are uniquely placed to chart the changes that have occurred over the last fifty years or so.

When Mick joined in 1958 the reformed club had only been going for 3 years. In 1955, following a public meetings a number of determined individuals such as Don Roberts, W. Wales, B. Drysdale, D. Baker, A. Wilson, A. Dunstan, T. Ryan, F. Prophet, W. McLaughlin, W. Young, J. Cuthbertson J. Caddy and interestingly, Jack Starkey, who at that time was president of the Racing Club, willed the club into existence. Willed? Well they had no members, no money and no course. Nowadays when a new club comes into existence it is usually because a property developer thinks it might make a nice selling point to offer potential buyers or because an existing club has accepted an offer to exchange their land for a brand new course.

It wasn't quite like that in 1955. They had the offer of Matthew Bennett Park which was home to the racing club but also used by other groups such as the Harley Davidson Motor Cycle Club for scrambles, horse groups for gymkhanas and even wood chopping during show carnivals. In the late 19th century according to Alan Rogers, a future president, a Mr Davy Brown who, "with a horse team, an axe, crowbar, and copious amounts of elbow grease, carved a five furlong track out of heavy messmate and scrub." It became the Whiskey Creek Racecourse and held meetings at least every New Year's day. The club went into recess but revived after WW2 when a number of enthusiastic individuals rolled up their sleeves and created a course.

The club began with six holes enclosed by the race track. The fairways were hardly "fair." Even with the rubbish and undergrowth removed, they were nothing more than paddocks. A ball straying from the fairway was probably lost; a ball hit to the centre could still be trapped by yabby holes or logs. When you made it to the green then it helped to be colour blind. The "greens" were actually sand scrapes. You can still find sand scrapes today in the Mallee where water is an issue. Water has hardly ever been an issue in West Gippsland but the club just didn't have the manpower to maintain greens.

When Mick joined, the course had expanded to 12 holes and then in 1960, 14 holes and eventually in 1963, 18 holes. What's more, by this time, the "greens" were green. In 1960 Pat Gleeson – some of you might know about Gleeson's hotel in the main street of Drouin - and Jack Dickers, a local builder, had shown it was possible. Inspired by this the club set about the task of conversion. In the summer of probably 1962, over a hot long weekend, 13 greens were constructed and sown with grass.

Grass might have been sown but what was reaped was capeweed and thistle. Apparently a pen knife has multiple uses but it was more likely the pesticide which did the trick sufficient for the tournament of that year to be played on greens. They were ready for the tournament after receiving a last minute cut with Victa mowers late at night with the headlights of cars guiding the way. There is no record of the stipometer reading but you would imagine in racing parlance that they were "slow." By 1963 the club was confident enough to announce itself to the world by officially opening an eighteen hole grass-greened course.

An immediate consequence of this was an expansion of numbers for the club. Drouin people who had been part of Warragul returned to the fold when they realised they had a “proper course” on which to play. As a digression I am often intrigued by the many Warragul people today who choose our club. I know why I do. It can’t possibly be anything to do with the superiority of our course? No of course not because Warragul people are quick to claim their course is the best in Gippsland. Perhaps we should leave the judgement to Anthony, Warragul born and bred, who hasn’t managed to get home ever.

Now Peter could get caught up in this argument too because at one stage he was a Warragul member but in the sixties with brother, Mick, he helped develop the course.

The work was constant. Sunday working bees were a feature. It wasn’t clear whether they came before or after church or if indeed instead of church. No golf could be played; Jack Stroud was a stickler for that; instead members set about the myriad tasks that needed to be done. Think of all the things our ground staff do just to maintain the course and then add to that the improvements and you have an idea of what the members did. It was their course; if they didn’t do it no one else would; they certainly didn’t want payment.

One of the tasks was to change the lay out. When it became a full 18-hole course it had 6 par 3s, 6 par 5s and 6 par 4s. Unilaterally in about 1969 or 1970, Gordon McDowell who was captain and Don Murphy a committeeman decide to change the lay out to a more conventional configuration. The match Committee objected strongly. A barney ensued. The changes went ahead. It is not clear where Peter and Mick stood in all of this but they would have attended the working bees when these changes occurred.

There were plenty of tasks though for the professionals but fortunately they often were a forgetful lot. Jack Cuthbertson, a life member, did a lot of the heavy work with his bulldozer. Strangely he often seemed to be reluctant to accept payment saying the equipment was no use to any one if it was idle. Mick De Vries was no better. After 10 years, Treasurer Allan Rogers realised Mick hadn’t been paid; charitably Mick accepted debentures in the new land purchase as recompense. For both men it wasn’t an issue because it was “their” club.

Mick helped create the character of the course. When you land in the damn on the 3rd thank Mick for providing you with a challenge that next time you will overcome. He also helped “save” the course after the fiasco of the natural gas pipeline. In 1968 the second nine was closed while, in Hugh Mapleson’s words, “much of our employees’ time was taken up with an ignorant crew of loafers who passed as pipe technicians.” After the contractor’s heavy machinery was hopelessly bogged the club called in Mick, “who accomplished in three days something that these characters had been obstinately trying to achieve for about a month.”

Mick was also responsible for felling of trees that were deemed hazardous. In those days no Shire permit was needed. If you wanted to get rid of it you simply cut it down. With only a hint of a grin Mick conceded that he probably cut down more than was strictly necessary.

It may also have brought him into conflict with Peter. Peter was involved with the committee for about twenty years. At one stage he thought it was time to beautify the course and so with Frank Cobbledick who was the curator and the expert advice of a forest officer from Neerim South and a horticulturalist from Sale, two thousand trees were recommended for their suitability for the different locations. When the racing Club heard of this they created a stink but it was too late though because Peter and Frank had already planted the trees. The irony is that some of the trees proved quite unsuitable and didn’t survive and would have been cut. Of course Mick was probably the one to do the cutting. Some of the exceptions were the stands of trees near the 9th and 16th greens. For those of you who complain about the litter they create on the green, stop and look. They are beautiful

Another of Mick's jobs created problems for Peter as well. Drainage has always been a problem. In the 19th Century the land was unattractive to settlers basically because it was a swamp. It wasn't until well into the 20th Century that the problem was solved. At one stage the fairways had drains a metre wide carved in the sides. This was Mick's job. While he happily did the task, Peter, who by this time was captain, copped the consequent abuse. The drains should be GRU. No it would be too difficult to define. But it's unfair. Well you shouldn't have hit the ball there in the first place. If you think about how we manage today to differently interpret the interference from the track's running rail – always to our advantage coincidentally – you can imagine the fun and games that would have gone on if the drains had been made GRU. Peter said that it caused endless and at times fiery debate.

Peter served on the committee on and off for about twenty years. In that time he was Captain and Junior Vice president. His contribution was such that in 1981, Jo Collins, President at the time, had this to say: "Special mention should be made to the magnificent contribution of Captain, Peter De Vries, to our club. His efforts in course improvement, clubhouse building and presentation of the game of golf has moved the club into a new era. Peter's enthusiasm and attention to detail has no doubt generated the increase in player participation we have seen on course and created the atmosphere which has assisted membership increase." A fine tribute and one that in a different way could apply to Mick as well.

You might wonder why Mick and Peter and the many others like them would spend so many unpaid hours labour for the club. The game of golf is only part of the answer. After all you can play the game and let someone else do the work. It was being part of a can-do community. Governments weren't as involved in the minutiae of people's lives and in any case there wasn't the money to spare. Small country towns in particular were held together by the institutions of Church or sport. Or it might be a local hospital. Somewhere in there was probably the local pub. Mick and Peter found it easy to contribute to something local.

And it provided plenty in return. The Friday nights at the golf club became famous. Or should that read notorious? You brought your own beer, carefully labelled it and placed it in the kerosene fridge and hoped that no one mistook it for theirs. In 1968 a liquor licence was obtained and things really took off. Darts, hookey, card games, pool and animated talk were all on offer. The large Melbourne membership participated as well and it wasn't unusual for Jack Stroud to eventually throw the keys to some "responsible individual" at two or three in the morning and say, "Lock up when you leave." Mick wasn't a drinker but he was always there. Peter may have helped swell the profits of the bar trade.

So, people worked hard and played hard. The end result is that they built a club that today continues to provide pleasure to many.

Written by George Shand