



# WORLD

## heritage golf

### Ross Perrett

AUSTRALIA can now lay claim to having a golf course in a World Heritage Marine Park—possibly a world first. The recently opened Hamilton Island Golf Club on the adjacent Dent Island proves that, with responsible planning and design, golf has an exciting future in Australia—despite the existence of an arguably overly-bureaucratic planning environment, which is a major bug-bear for the Golf Development Industry.

It does, however, demand an holistic commitment to the environment by the development team—including the Developer/Owner, the Architect and a raft of consultants with expertise in a diverse range of subjects. At Hamilton Island, the experts covered local flora and fauna, marine biology, reef geomorphology, civil engineering, soil and turf agronomy, naval architecture, cultural heritage and so on. Apart from considerable scientific expertise, determination, patience and financial resources are fundamental to success.

The story of Dent Island is nearly 20 years in the making and provides an interesting case study of what is required to create a special golf experience. Similar stories could be told of projects in other countries where golf has had to prove that it is a good corporate and environmentally-responsible citizen. The heady days between the 1890's and the 1930's—where great golf courses like Royal County Down, Turnberry,

Sunningdale, Royal Melbourne and Cypress Point were built without much fuss or fanfare—are gone forever. That is not to say we won't be able to build courses of their calibre, but it will take considerably more effort to get permission to do so and the strategically-located natural sites are not readily available.

The site for the Hamilton Island course is on Dent Island, approximately one kilometre from the established tourist resort of Hamilton Island which has its own airport. Dent Island is approximately 2500 acres in area and has been unoccupied since its lighthouse became unmanned. Unlike Hamilton Island which boasts several stunning beaches, Dent Island is a rugged rocky monolith that initially did not seem naturally conducive to playing golf due to the extreme slopes of the land.

The starting point for any design project is to get to know the land—preferably on foot with the help of accurate contour information and up-to-date aerial photography. The more time spent onsite, the better the design response will be. Further, the architect must gain an understanding of all the other constraints that will affect the design, including the site's geology, soils, vegetation, seasonal rainfall and temperatures and wind patterns.

The major design constraint with the Dent Island site was the lack of flat land suitable for fairways and in particular for par-5's. This dictated the



use of elevated tees with large carries and the concentration of holes on ridges and in valleys. Side slopes were avoided as the slopes were too severe and would have required massive earthworks and would have left unsightly scars. The resulting routing plan responds well to the contours and creates two nines of contrasting character. The front nine is more conventional with holes concentrated in a series of valleys whereas the back nine generally runs along the island's central ridge. The course is a 6120m par-71 with four par-3's and only three par-5's which, given the site's prevalent wind, is challenging enough.

Designing a course that could be enjoyed by golfers of all levels was non-negotiable in the design brief, yet difficult to achieve on such a rugged piece of land. The owners wanted the course to appeal to the golf purists as well as tourists, many of whom would not be accomplished golfers. To overcome this potential dilemma, it was decided early on not to present the course with conventional arrangement of tees—i.e. championship tee, male and female tees. Instead alternative tees offering differing degrees of difficulty are available to all players and are referred to as Hoop Pine, Pandanas and Grass Tree, named after three

prominent trees onsite of differing heights.

Having settled on a workable routing plan, the next challenge was to get planning permission to build the course. This proved to be an expensive and drawn out process that required patiently working through a raft of issues and solving myriad problems—most of which were not strictly related to golf.

Being located in a World Heritage Marine Park the project was never going to get planning permission without a total commitment to the environment. A series of Environmental Management Plans (EMP) were developed and worked through thoroughly with the



The three stages of construction for the 4th hole at Dent Island

appropriate Planning authorities. These addressed issues such as Coral Reef Protection, Flora and Fauna Protection, Tree Clearing, Landscaping, Erosion Control, Water Management, Drainage and Bush Fire Management. A full-time Environmental Consultant would be required to monitor and report on the construction process to ensure that the EMP's were properly executed.

The construction phase proved to be even more challenging than the planning and design phase. Being a rocky island surrounded by a coral reef, the logistics required to build this course were exceptional. All heavy equipment and materials required to build the course had to be barged in at high tides to avoid damaging the reef. The equipment included bulldozers, excavators,

trucks, tractors, site vehicles, crushing plants, concrete batching plants, fuel tanks and eventually golf maintenance equipment.

The materials included approximately 60 kilometres of irrigation pipe, green sand, concrete and turf. An onsite crushing plant made all the sand required for backfilling irrigation trenches, all the gravel for green and subsoil drainage as well as all the gravel and sand for over 11 kilometres of concrete cart paths. The original idea of importing a sand cap for fairways was abandoned due to logistical difficulties. Instead, the precious topsoil on site had to be carefully managed. All excavated material was screened to ensure that not a drop of topsoil was wasted.

Labour was another major constraint as Hamilton Island could

not accommodate the workforce which at times approached 80 personnel. Initially the workforce was ferried to Hamilton Island from Airlie Beach on the mainland and then transferred by smaller craft to Dent Island. This proved to be very inefficient so a worker's camp was established on Dent Island which at its peak accommodated 65 personnel. The camp itself required extensive infrastructure but proved to be invaluable and critical to delivering the project in a realistic time frame.

Operationally the course demanded an innovative solution to the logistics of getting golfers seamlessly from Hamilton Island to Dent Island to play golf, a distance of about 900 metres. From a central location in the Hamilton Island Marina, golfers are transported by a purpose-built boat to



a landing facility on Dent, where they are met and taken to the Clubhouse. The trip is less than 10 minutes and is a unique way to prepare for golf and a reminder that you will be playing golf in a marine park.

If you are lucky enough to have the opportunity to play at Hamilton Island spare a thought for what has gone before you and hopefully it will make your golfing experience even more special. Enjoy ! ◀



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