

CHIPPING IN with Paul Prendergast

MORE THAN 50 years ago a young teenager walked through the gates and up the long driveway of the Riversdale Golf Club in suburban Melbourne ... he was searching for a way forward, for an opportunity, a chance to pursue his dreams.

Young Anthony David Graham could not have known at the time but as he found his way from his Lillian Street home to Riversdale, he was to encounter a man who would become his salvation.

"What George Naismith saw in me was something completely different than a golfer," Graham, a two-time Major winner, said on his return to Riversdale during Presidents Cup week – some 30 years after his most previous visit.

Graham was back in Australia for the first time in many years as part of the Presidents Cup executive committee, where Graham participated in the opening and closing ceremonies.

To their great credit, Riversdale reached out to Graham when they learned he was keen to visit the club.

A low key lunch, with the club's current and former executives, heritage committee members, head professional and course superintendent was arranged on the day the Presidents Cup matches teed off.

Graham arrived at the club with close friend Alan Warrick, a fellow member at the Ironhorse Club in Whitefish, Montana, who was clearly enjoying his first trip to Australia.

Warrick was having a marvellous time, sampling some of the local 'delights' like meat pies, pasties and fish and chips along the way at Graham's insistence.

"I need to get him a sausage roll, maybe a Polly Waffle and some Jaffas," Graham joked.

Graham animatedly pointed out the professional's shop where he put in extremely long hours, buffing and grinding clubs and basically tending to the members' every need.

"Looking back, it was damn near slave labour but it moulded me," he said.

The practice range running parallel to the entry driveway, where former head professional Naismith found the then left handed Graham practicing one evening, is much as it was back in the day

Emotions flow at Riversdale

David Graham goes full cycle



I used to make putts! Now I'm so damn emotional, I can't even make a speech!

Naismith insisted Graham start playing right handed.

"Son, you'll never be any good playing left handed. Go and make yourself some right handed clubs, I never want to see you playing left handed again," Graham recalled of Naismith's tough love.

Wandering around the front of the clubhouse before lunch in the boardroom, Graham chatted to some startled members preparing for their game, pointing out distant holes and landmarks to Warrick and even running into a veteran member, who reminded Graham he once used to pick him up to drive him to the club!

△ Australian golfing great David Graham is equally efficient at a left or right-handed swing

As he savoured the surrounds and spoke of his memories with the lunch guests, his thoughts did not stray far from Naismith, for whom the club has planted a tree in his honour on the grounds.

"What he saw was a kid in need. And in that regard, he really rose to the occasion. At that time he had no clue I was going to be any good at golf at all," Graham said.

Graham had worked as an assistant in the shop for two years before Naismith even learned Graham played the game left handed!

"He knew my situation (at home) and he basically became the father I never had," Graham, said reaching for a tissue.



My experience in life has made me a much better father and a much better husband and a much better grandparent

"Shit. I used to make putts! Now I'm so damn emotional I can't even make a speech!"

"What I wanted to accomplish in coming here was to lay to rest my years here and to tell the club of my gratitude for being here. I remember back in 1970, I won the Victorian Open. It was a proud moment because George stood by the 18th green.

"Even in those days, I think he knew I'd be a pretty good player but not to the extent I did become.

"In 1979, I flew the US PGA Championship medal to Australia and gave it to George. His family, graciously, sent it back to me after he passed.

△ David Graham (centre front) surrounded by a clutch of the many friends he has made during his golfing career

"Looking back now, I realise how lucky I've been, how grateful I am and how successful I've become."

"I don't think I want to be judged as a player. I now have five grandchildren and I don't want them to know me as a golfer, I want them to know me as the person."

"My experience in life has made me a much better father and a much better husband and a much better grandparent. Golf is now only part of my memories."

As Graham regaled the group with amusing anecdotes of recent golf outings with Arnold Palmer in Palm Springs ('Arnie still likes to fiddle with clubs and change his own grips. He turns up with

The moral to the story is for people to look at kids and to never be judgmental. Always extend a hand to young people in need

two big golf bags on a cart, each filled with golf clubs') and also close friend Lee Trevino, club president Rod Bennett spoke of Graham's achievements and his links to the club, before announcing the club would bestow Graham with life membership and award him a 50-year membership silver medal.

"I'm very grateful, thank you," Graham responded in humbled tones.

"I know if my days here (at Riversdale) had not happened, I'm not sure where I would have finished up. The moral to the story is for people to look at kids and to never be judgmental. Always extend a

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hand to young people in need.

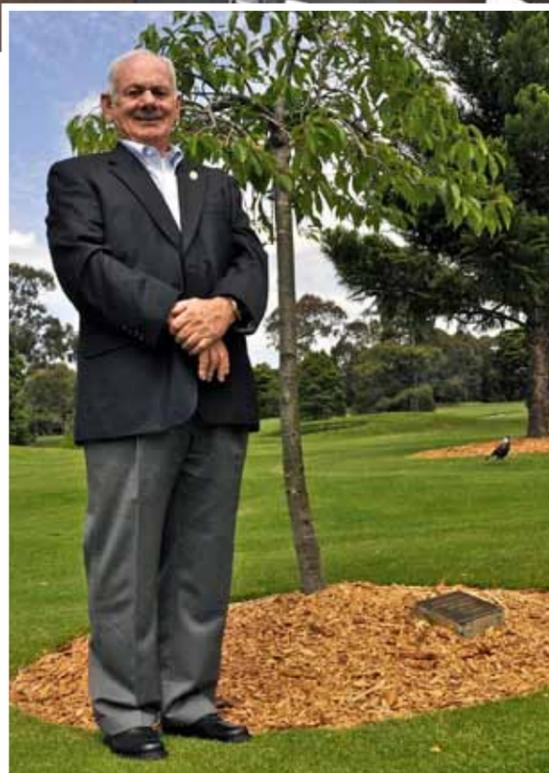
"I'm actively involved in raising money for kids and for abused families in the United States in particular. We started a program in Montana three years ago to feed the needy and in the first year, we fed 800 people, then 1800 the next year and this year: 2200 kids.

"I went by Lillian Street, where I spent most of my time as a kid. The house is still there. I have fond memories and I have memories I wish I didn't have," he conceded, struggling again to choke back the tears.

"My coming through the gate and meeting George and being accepted here, is part of who I am. And, this (visit) is not closure for me but it's certainly something I'm grateful for."

After composing himself and pleading to change the subject to a lighter topic, Graham joked: "Hogan said I used to have ice in my veins, now I've got nothing!"

On the contrary, a few hours spent in the company of David Graham – champion husband, father and grandfather (who once played a bit of golf) – demonstrated to all those present that he has much more than the steely eyed exterior we were all familiar with in his days as a player, watching him from behind the ropes or on TV.



△ The glasses didn't stay full long as David Graham's career was celebrated at Riversdale recently

◁ David Graham at the tree and plaque dedicated to George Naismith

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Graham's raw emotion, self deprecating humour, humility, sincerity and integrity shone through and touched all of us who were fortunate enough to be at the lunch.

Graham saved one final treat for his hosts on a tour of the course after lunch.

Grabbing a member's club, he struck a shot close to the pin on a par 3 hole then repeated the shot, this time with

another player's left handed club – the mannerisms and two golf swings a mirror image of each other!

Even though he chose to ignore his former mentor's strict instruction 'never to play left handed again,' on this occasion I'm sure Mr Naismith would be very proud of the man the boy from the pro shop has become.

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