

# Maintaining the passion

/// By Paul Prendergast

The most successful golf course architects include many men who have withstood the passage of time and changes in the game, constantly evolving their style and skills to continue to flourish in the modern era - much like the ageing of a premium red wine.

Some of the world's finest architects - Pete Dye, Robert Trent Jones II, Tom Fazio, the great Peter Thomson and Jack Nicklaus - have been plying their trade and producing magnificent work after decades in the business and are still active well past the age most other people have retired.

Australian course designer Ross Watson shares the same passion, energy and skill as his colleagues after chalking up more than three successful decades in the business.

Watson continues to be as in demand as ever and has some forthright opinions and clear convictions on golf and golf course design, although he now plays less these days after maintaining a low handicap and winning multiple club championships at his club in western Sydney as a younger man.

"I started in golf at age 14 with some mates. Thought it was a stupid game, as we all do. Somehow or another I got hooked, as we all do!"

Watson was so passionate for the game that he nearly accepted the offer of a trainee professional job at the Windsor Golf Club near Sydney, only for the counsel of his father to influence his decision to follow a more cautious pathway of an education and a career.

"I did the usual things, got interested in a woman (now his wife), acquired tertiary qualifications, established a career

Koindah Waters

in the Department of Main Roads and that was it for a long while."

"But I was always passionate about the game. I'd be driving along in the countryside with my wife Carolyn and look across and say 'My God, did you see that?'"

"She'd say 'I see cows', but I'd say 'Yeah, but can't you see a great golf hole down there?' She's often said since 'We should have realised back then what would eventuate.'"

What has eventuated under the Ross Watson Golf Course Architecture banner is a long and glittering course design career, responsible for over 70 golf course projects in Australia, Malaysia, Japan and Indonesia.

For the vast majority of his career, Watson has stood alone although he did link for a number of years with prolific Australian tournament winner Graham Marsh.

The 'Marsh Watson' partnership saw the emergence of such courses as The Vines Resort and Robina Woods in Australia and a handful of courses in Japan, capitalising on Marsh's high profile in that country.

Watson's early tertiary studies and working career with the Main Roads would teach him plenty about civil engineering, surveying and construction projects, skills that have embellished his natural artistic flair for course design.

"I was always designing, always visualising and drawing."

Watson was to leave the Main Roads and start working for a private consultant engineering firm in Queensland from the mid-1970s and it was during this phase of his working life that the realities of a career in course design started to emerge for Watson.

"I really had no idea before then how golf courses eventuated. What really got my attention was working for Geoff Burchill & Partners from about 1974 through 1978 and working on the Windaroo residential project (outside Brisbane)."

"I was allocated the (golf course design) project because I asked



Kooindah Waters



them to give me a crack at it instead of some other golf course designers they were looking at. And they did."

"I did the bulk of it for Burchill then went over to work for the owner of the property, the Rocky Point Sugar Mill."

"I completed the second nine holes at Windaroo when I was a golf designer in my own right."

Watson cut his teeth in the business from the ground up, without the help of an established design company or 'mentor' in the business.

"The modern golf architect these days usually come in on the back of another well established company. I came into it on my own, so I had to learn on the job."

"My first jobs were really grass roots remodelling of golf courses for

clubs that didn't have a lot of money but had a lot of people involved with a lot of ideas. So you have to learn to massage those ideas, work your way through it and win their support."

"If you've got a limited budget to work with, you've really got to think hard to work out how to maximise the dollar and still produce a top product. Unless you've come into the business on your own, scratched around, tried to get a bit of work to build your name, then you won't have had the experience that I've had."

"I do take quite a bit of pride in taking some pretty ordinary pieces of land and turning them into something special."

"Magenta Shores in NSW was built on a (rubbish) tip site and

you couldn't see the ocean for the sand hills, so we reversed it and put tonnes of sand on the tip."

"We were fortunate to be able to use a lot of the natural terrain at Kota Permai, A'Famosa and Staffield in Malaysia but some of the others had to be totally manufactured from difficult sites like Impian, Tropicana and Horizon Hills."

"In the planning phase, you're looking for any natural features that you can use to maximise interest: green settings, natural hazards that you can play around or over, beach front, anything."

"At 99 Degrees East in Langkawi recently, I managed to plot the routing of the course to get 3 greens near the ocean with the beautiful island backdrops that we had available to us, which is what I call

maximising the features of the land."

Watson does not necessarily subscribe to any one particular architectural style, not wanting to copy the style of those who have gone before him or looking to develop a 'Ross Watson' style.

"My first philosophy is to let the land dictate the flow of the golf course. There are a lot of clients who want a par 72, 7000 metre golf course but the scale of the land available might not allow for that. You can't go in with a pre-determined view of what the golf course will be if the land doesn't allow for it."

Prior to his first opportunity at Windaroo, Watson was able to visit the United States on a study tour to play and inspect venerable courses like Pebble Beach, Cypress Point, Hillcrest Country Club and courses

in Palm Springs.

"Geoff Burchill paid for me to go over there before I built Windaroo to do a crash course on how to design and build a golf course," Watson recalls.

Perhaps it was the civil engineer in him but Watson did not come back armed with accumulation of information that would enable him to copy what he had seen in the US from an architectural perspective, despite being completely full of praise for the quality of these golf courses and their locations.

Rather he recalls bringing back many notes that would prove to be the bedrock of his later success.

"When I arrived back, we had a meeting and I produced a wad of notes and said 'Well fellas, here's what not to do,' he laughed.



Magenta Shores



Magenta Shores



Magenta Shores

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“My approach was if we avoided all that stuff, we’d be okay. I also learned from a lot of course superintendents about how to lay drain lines, not having a bunker too close to some greens, what to do and not to do.”

“I came into the business green and just developed as I went along, without any pre-conceptions of how things should be. I’ve done a lot of different bunker styles, pot bunkers like at St Andrews, ‘MacKenzie styled’ bunkers, but I always go back to determining ‘What’s right for this piece of land?’; and also ‘What’s sustainable in the budget of the client?’”

As mentioned, Watson takes pride in creating good golf courses out of challenging sites, but points out most designers don’t get handed a ‘perfect’ piece of property very often.

“I can’t think of any I’ve done

that were simple walks in the park. Magenta Shores was probably the ‘Pièce de résistance’ because I had sand. I had serious sand to work with which is what I’d always wanted, even though we had to turn everything upside down to achieve what we did.”

Watson himself sits on the judging panel ranking the Top 100 course and reflects with some satisfaction and humility on the number of golf courses that he has either created or completely remodelled that appear in Top 100 course lists.

In the most recently published lists across several publications, Watson’s courses appear upward of a dozen times.

“It’s more than 10%, not too bad,” he said.

The diversity of Watson’s architectural work in these golf courses is also a feature, from

coastal courses like Pacific Harbour, Kooindah Waters and Magenta Shores, the acclaimed re-design of the former resort course at the Palms at Sanctuary Cove to well established ‘parkland style’ private courses like Royal Sydney and Concord Golf Club.

A testament to his theory of working with what the land provides you.

Watson adds “There are at least four or five in the Top 20 in Malaysia too, it may be more.”

In fact, in the most recent ‘Golf Malaysia Magazine’ Course Poll, conducted over the period 2008 - 2010, almost 6000 respondents highlighted the popularity and regard for Watson designs in that country.

Five of Watson’s designs ranked in the top 15 courses with the Kota Permai Golf & Country Club, southwest of Kuala Lumpur, ranked

Number One in Malaysia.

Watson’s 30 years in the business has not dulled his passion for the sheer ‘nuts and bolts’ of the job, nor does he harbour plans for retirement any time soon.

The guy who used to stare at vacant fields and visualise potential golf holes still has that creative passion, maintaining a desire for work and to be an intrinsic part of every project.

“If you hire Ross Watson Golf Course Architecture, you’re hiring me, not some junior associate of a company.”

“I always insisted that for projects overseas, for example, that I go to a site once every 4 to 6 weeks and spend about 3 to 4 days there.”

“That works out to be about 12 visits during the construction phase and another 4 in the design phase. My reputation depends on the end product, not the plans, so

I would guess I would spend more time on average on site than most designers.”

“I’m not a ‘plans only’ man because I like to see the land and tweak it on the ground if necessary. If you’re on the ground at the right time in construction, you can turn a problem into an asset. I’ve always said that a problem is a concealed opportunity.”

“You can start to think outside the box a little, make instant changes to the original plans. You can possibly save the client some money in the short and long-term and improve the playability and sustainability of the golf course, but you can’t do that if you’re not there on site.”

Watson has obviously progressed a long way from the early days when he didn’t know how golf courses came about, to the present where he is a font of great knowledge and wisdom on golf course design,

project leadership and merging residential community planning in a golf course setting.

Fundamentally though, his work is a source of great pleasure for many thousands of players, which give Watson great joy in return.

“I like when people don’t know who the designer is when they play a course and then be surprised that it’s one of mine, because it’s different from another one of mine down the road.”

“I like to use some artistic flair to create diversity in my golf courses and I want people to have to think when they play them. I want strategic golf where you’ve got to decide on a hole that there’s the hard way and the bail out option.”

“The balance between risk and reward is a difficult thing as is challenging the low marker versus catering for the average player on the same golf course.”