

# 'Advantage: The Internationals, at Royal Melbourne!'

By Paul Prendergast  
Photography: Mark Wilson

*The 2nd at Royal Melbourne Golf Club.*

A few months out from the Presidents Cup, I was kindly given the opportunity by the club to play both the East and West courses at Royal Melbourne in Black Rock, Victoria, from which six holes from the East and 12 from the West comprise the famed Composite Course. The Composite course was first used for the 1959 'Canada Cup' as the World Cup was then known, won by Australians Peter Thomson and Kel Nagle. With huge crowds expected, organisers created the Composite layout so players and crowds did not have to take the risk of crossing public roads that split the two courses. Hence, 18 holes within what's known locally as the 'home paddock' was used and the rest is history.

The Presidents Cup course is a slightly different rotation of holes again from the Composite layout. The 2011 version will be re-routed and include a different hole from the course used for the 1998 Cup, to better expedite the high volume of traffic and to create better spectator vantage points for the public and corporate hospitality.

The 18th hole of the East course and also the Composite layout, will now become the 16th hole to allow greater corporate and grandstand areas along the expanse of space to the right of the hole. Statistically speaking, more matches in Ryder and Presidents Cup history are finalised on the 16th hole too so this

decision maximises the potential action for a greater number of people. Not many matches in contrast, end on the 18th hole.

The tournament committee have also opted to drop the long, uphill par-3 4th on the East course from the rotation and include another great hole, the neighbouring par-3 16th from the East, again, to improve traffic and spectator vantage points.

From a playing perspective, the selection and rotation of holes matter little as the quality of the golf holes available are sublime. In terms of world rankings, Royal Melbourne stands out as the finest layout the Presidents Cup has been played on in its short history and is Australia's Number One golf course.

Dr. Alister Mackenzie's visit to Australian shores in 1926 resulted in the design of Royal Melbourne's West course and an influence on a great many other Australian courses and course designers of the time. Mackenzie's time at Royal Melbourne was insufficient to oversee the complete construction of the course but he left Australia safe in the knowledge that the local green keeper, Mick Morcom, could carry out his grand plans to a tee.

And what a magnificent job they have done. Combine that work with the construction of the East course a few years later, from a design by local Alex Russell in the spirit of Mackenzie, and the result is a masterpiece. Rare in the world of golf can there here be found a more natural and exquisite set of green and bunker complexes than at this expansive location.

Mackenzie's bunkers in particular, similar to the work he completed at Cypress Point and later at the Augusta

National, have been both the envy and the inspiration of many golfers and successive generations of course designers. Modern artisans Tom Doak, Ben Crenshaw and Australia's Greg Norman, have swooned over the elements that make Royal Melbourne so great and have imitated many of Mackenzie's characteristics in their own course design philosophies.

The captain of the Internationals for 2011, Norman, has long regarded Royal Melbourne as his favourite course and his combatant again this year, Fred Couples, ranks it alongside Augusta National and St. Andrews as his favourite courses.

A prevailing design characteristic that is so evident in the holes is the room presented to players from the tee, a key feature also of the Old Course at St. Andrews and until recent years, Augusta National. The line of play from most tees is relatively easy to identify, with a few exceptions. There is plenty of room to play away from fairway traps or the corner of a dogleg but the safer the play from the tee, the more difficult your approach to the green. In an interview with the great Peter Thomson, he agreed with an assessment that the strategies required bear similarities in many ways to the Old Course, where the closer you get to the green, the more the difficulty levels are raised and especially so if you take the wrong line from the tee.

Much like the Old Course, Royal Melbourne also relies on ocean breezes to guarantee the sternest of tests but can be susceptible to low scoring in more benign conditions. The Old Course features one water hazard, the Swilcan Burn that crosses in front of the first green, otherwise the hazards that confront you inside the



*The 5th hole.*





boundaries are all natural. Royal Melbourne has no water in play on any hole.

The wide fairways can coerce you into hitting freely with a driver on a short par-4, for example, only to find yourself stymied by a green side bunker, downhill lie or humps and hollows that lie in the way to the pin. Miss a fairway wildly however, and thick native tea trees lie in wait on almost every hole from which there is rarely an escape.

Like St. Andrews, the greens are large targets but very undulating and famously, very firm and fast. The 'Suttons Mix' bent grass has been reintroduced to the greens to restore the firm and fast surfaces that were originally created, which by definition here means 'more' firm and fast than normal!

Hitting a green in regulation is not as challenging as hitting the right part of the green to have any chance of a realistic attempt at birdie. When the greens are at their peak, only precisely struck and correctly flighted shots will have a chance to get near the pin. My recent experience at the 6th hole on the West (4th in the Presidents Cup) illustrates this perfectly. After my tee shot, I was left with a mid iron to a front right pin on this treacherously sloping green. Hoping for a slight fade to release towards the pin, I hit a solid straight shot which kicked hard on landing and released to the back of the green, leaving me a slippery 50 foot

downhill putt with approximately 15 feet of break!

Other examples of wonderfully designed greens that require pin point accuracy, a deft touch and imagination are littered throughout the layout. The classic par-3 fifth hole on the West, where Mackenzie personally supervised construction before his departure, is a beautifully located green cut into a hill in an amphitheatre setting. The green slopes sharply from back to front and drops off into a valley in front of the green which is closely mown. It is ringed by deep bunkering and natural rough on the collars. Anything landing just short of the green is destined to roll back some 30 metres, from where you are faced with a delicate uphill pitch off tight turf that if not struck correctly, could run back to your feet time and again.

The course will play in all directions of the compass and feature short and long par-4s, some accessible par-5s, some inaccessible pin locations and plenty of opportunities for good play to be rewarded.

Which teams might have the edge? The quality of players in the Presidents Cup is without question and any one of them will be as capable of playing well at Royal Melbourne as the next. The Internationals have a distinct advantage in the experience that their captain, Greg Norman, brings to the table. Norman first played this course



*A view of the Clubhouse.*

in the 1970s and has played countless tournaments in all manner of conditions and wind directions. He has won on the course and played in the last Presidents Cup in 1998, not to mention studied every blade of grass and nuance out of an admiration and affection that spills over into his course designs around the globe.

There is no one with his pedigree in world golf, with the possible exception of Peter Thomson, who knows better than he how this course plays and how it can

change in character in the course of the week.

His opposite number, Fred Couples, however is also no stranger to Royal Melbourne, having played in the well beaten US team in 1998 and tasting some success when 2nd to Rodger Davis in the 1988 Bicentennial Classic. However, while this knowledge will be of value to his team, it's 'Advantage Greg' and the Internationals on this front.

The Internationals will enjoy the bulk



*Royal Melbourne's 16th.*



*Rough at Royal Melbourne.*

of Royal Melbourne tournament experience as most of the possible Australian contingent plus Ernie Els and Retief Goosen have played in and even won tournaments at Royal Melbourne. Who will ever forget Els' magnificent 60 on the Composite layout in the 2004 Heineken Classic when co-sanctioned with the European Tour at the time?

Of the US players, Tiger Woods, Jim Furyk and Phil Mickelson played in the losing 1998 team and Matt Kuchar would have played here in Australian Tour events. Otherwise, the rest of Couples' team are likely to be taking their first look at the property this year. Couples may choose to rectify this imbalance with his Captain's picks but I can't help but give the advantage on local knowledge to the Internationals.

Which are the holes to watch and who might best be capable of taking advantage?

It's easy to say 'all of them' at a great course like this but, in my opinion, the course rotation for this year's Cup provides some exciting prospects for match play, particularly at the start and end of the round. The first hole, whilst driveable in the right conditions, will be played conservatively but things should hot up at the 2nd, a reachable par-5 that doglegs sharply left to right once the well bunkered crown of the hill is carried off the tee. Likewise the 4th hole, a wonderful par-4 from an elevated tee, also doglegs sharply left to right and rewards the player who can take the high risk line over as much of the corner as possible. Success will leave a short iron or wedge to one of the most treacherous greens on the course.





*View across to the 18th green, West.*

Credit Mark Wilson of Wisdom Advertising & Design

Towards the end of the round, the long par-5 along the boundary fence playing as the 15th for the Cup, will favour the longer hitters. The 16th is a strong par-4 with another undulating, well bunkered green and a sea of energy-charged spectators watching on from vantage points along this hole. The dogleg 18th is normally a very short par-5 by modern standards but will play as a long par-4 of upwards of 410 metres (450 yards) for the Cup.

Long hitters who can turn it left to right might have an advantage on these holes i.e. left handers Bubba Watson and Mickelson. Booming power draws on holes 2, 4, 15 and 18 will give them an advantage over right handed opponents, which could set them up for a flying start and/or a big finish to their matches. The traditional 'last day pins' on some of these holes will most likely be used in the Sunday singles matches and if so, the lefties might have the advantage of playing a comfortable draw into tucked pins on at least the 5th and 16th holes.

If you apply another theory that players who have done well at Augusta National's 'Mackenzie' greens and on firm, fast, US Open courses may have the best chance of adapting quickly to the challenging greens at Royal Melbourne, some interesting facts arise. On this front, Woods, Furyk and Mickelson stand out on the US side but the Internationals have a host of players in this category, headed by current Masters champion Charl Schwartzel, Els, Goosen, K.J. Choi and the Aussie trio of Geoff Ogilvy, Adam Scott and Jason Day who all challenged so strongly at Augusta this year.

The only victory the Internationals have secured was at this venue in 1998 and the next closest result was the tie declared by captains Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, at Fancourt in South Africa in 2003. Perhaps the further from home the US players have to travel, the less likely their chances of victory?

This may be the final factor that tips the scales towards an overdue win for the Internationals come November. ●



*The spacious Lounge.*



*The Fireplace.*



*The well appointed Library.*



*The Clubhouse, seen from one of the many bunkers that make the course so challenging.*

Credit Mark Wilson of Wisdom Advertising & Design