

A wide-angle photograph of the Royal Sydney Golf Club clubhouse and a green with sand traps under a clear blue sky. The clubhouse is a large, multi-story building with a prominent central tower and several flags flying from the roof. The green in the foreground is well-maintained with several large, irregular sand traps. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

Royal Sydney **REIMAGINED**

AMERICAN DESIGNER GIL HANSE HAS GIVEN THE VENERABLE GOLF COURSE, HOST TO 16 AUSTRALIAN OPENS, ITS BIGGEST MAKEOVER IN ITS LONG AND STORIED HISTORY. WORDS: PAUL PRENDERGAST.

It takes but a few minutes inside the capaciously grand clubhouse at the Royal Sydney Golf Club to appreciate its history, dating back to the club's origins in 1893.

Modern comforts are thoughtfully blended with the rich oak honour boards, trophies and other treasured items that help to chronicle the story of a multi-sport and community organisation that has seen the greats tread its courts, halls and fairways. The nooks and crannies of the clubhouse and locker rooms reveal items like a set of 19th century scales, still in perfect working order, in a corner of the locker room near where a shoeshine attendant has plied his trade for many years.

The golf course itself — host to 16 Australian Opens and with aspirations for more — has recently undergone the largest renovation and physical transformation in its history, courtesy of American course designer Gil Hanse. The most substantial tranche of restoration and change has now been completed, upending a routing that had remained largely unaltered for the better part of a century.

Through the club's 2030 strategic plan, several aspects of the golf course had been identified as overdue for upgrade and modernisation, including replacing irrigation systems and substructures that support the green complexes, bunkers and surrounds.

Apart from the fact that a century of play had taken a toll, the impacts of a tree-planting programme instituted from the 1940s, plus a near wall-to-wall turfing across the playing corridors, had likely rendered the golf course unrecognisable from its earliest iterations.

Many hundreds of older, failing trees have subsequently been removed and replaced by more than 2,000 new ones. In addition, around 300,000 smaller plants have been added, with a further 200,000 still to be planted, as many native regional species are sourced or grown from seed.

In all, 15 hectares of the golf course have been earmarked for heathland vegetation, the largest undertaking of its kind at a golf course in Sydney.

Like many of the country's premier golf clubs, Royal Sydney benefitted from Dr Alister MacKenzie's visit to Australia; MacKenzie acted as a consultant to the club in 1926 and stayed in the clubhouse while he formed his recommendations for the future of the golf course.

In the decades since, however, the natural sand base thought so desirable by the early founders and modern golf course architects had become essentially buried from view. Decisions made prior to subsequent course upgrades over the years served to perpetuate Royal Sydney's style and reputation as that of a 'parkland' setting amidst ever-maturing lines of trees — many of them not indigenous to the region.

Gil Hanse's earliest comments on the Royal Sydney assignment underlined his excitement at being able to work on such an esteemed golf course, along with the club's willingness to allow him the latitude to reveal the golf course's origins as a sand-based, heathland layout.

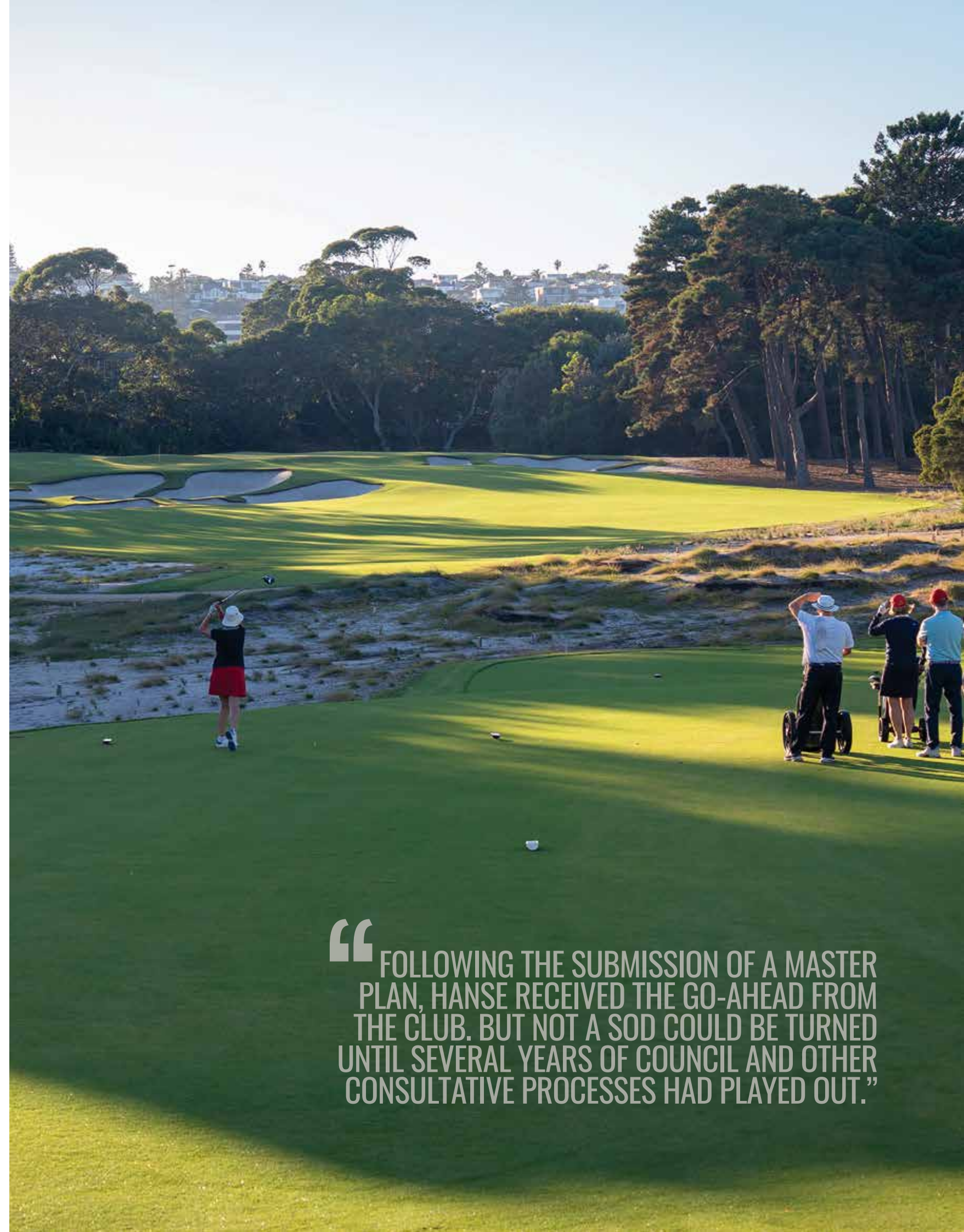
At the 2016 Australian Open at Royal Sydney, Hanse spoke of the great opportunity that lay ahead to open up and "create more separation" across the golf course while maximising the potential of the site's topography.

Following the submission of a master plan, Hanse received the go-ahead from the club. But not a sod could be turned until several years of council and other consultative processes had played out.

"Gil came here on many trips and was hands-on right after getting off the plane. He'd put his Grateful Dead playlist on his headphones and jumped straight behind the wheel of a dozer," men's captain and chair of the Course Redevelopment Committee Adam Cornell said.

"He meticulously designed every green, and being on the ground so much allowed him to suggest many alterations from the initial plans, including a new bunker on one of the new par-fours that he said would protect a back flag in an Australian Open.

"Fortunately," he added, "we were able to give him the freedom to make whatever changes he thought necessary."



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With many of the new vegetation areas still in a fragile state, the golf course opened to a limited round, walk-only play, for the members in April 2025. The creation of two nine-hole loops returning to the clubhouse is the most obvious routing change to those familiar with the old layout, with several new holes being created at the southern end of the property.

In fact, in a 1926 letter from MacKenzie to the golf club — only unearthed post-Hanse's appointment — was a recommendation to create two nine-hole loops returning to the clubhouse.

"Gil had already recommended to us that we needed two loops, so he was really chuffed when MacKenzie's letter surfaced," Cornell said.

The introduction of Pure Distinction creeping bent grass, which has been such a success at other Australian layouts in recent years, has already proven to be a boon for members, all of whom are now enjoying learning the borrows and breaks of Hanse's new greens.

"On the old layout, there wasn't one hole where you could put a flag in the middle of the green," Cornell said. "Gil's re-design now allows for so many additional pins, which

adds to the variety at our disposal in terms of setting up the golf course."

The land along O'Sullivan Road that housed the former par-5 7th has been used to create two short par-4s — the first of which has a huge fairway bunker reminiscent of the famed 10th hole at Royal Melbourne West — while the former 8th and 9th have been merged into a new par-5 (15th) that requires a drive over the crest of a natural dune.

Other significant changes include the creation of a new par-3 where the former 11th hole lay, and other

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alterations to existing holes in terms of their physical makeup and position on the routing.

The historically difficult par-3 17th is a good example of where both physical and routing changes have been undertaken; a treacherously tiered and bunkered target now replaced with a larger and more receptive green surrounded by short grass and a large rear bunker. With tees that allow the hole to be played from well under or over 200 metres, it now serves as the 10th hole on the club's newly-badged Bay Course.

Although the creation of new holes and a sweeping panorama of hectares of sand and heathland plantings are significant from wherever you look across the course, perhaps no hole best epitomises the transformation that has swept the Rose Bay layout than at the iconic 18th, the right-to-left dogleg par-four culminating with a tiered green set into shadows cast by Royal Sydney's clubhouse.

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Many significant championships have come down to the wire over the years, with names like McIlroy, Webb, Player, Crampton, Spieth, Pickworth and Calcavecchia among the winners; McIlroy pipped Adam Scott for the title in 2013 with a final-hole birdie to Scott's bogey.

In the 2016 Australian Open, emerging young lion Cameron Smith fell afoul of the only place you must not miss the fairway — to the left among the close-set paperbarks that formed a cluster of doom on the corner. Smith scored a decent break when his ball came to rest with a narrow corridor ahead and, after clearing spectators and roving TV commentators, he was able to punch the ball out across the fairway into a greenside trap.

The ensuing bogey, however, ultimately saw Smith join a playoff with Jordan Spieth and Victorian Ashley Hall, which Spieth won with a birdie on the first extra hole.

The playoff combatants would most certainly be taken aback by the changes at the 18th alone, starting with the complete removal of most of the paperbarks and other trees down the left side and around the corner leading up to the green.

The space available is now very generous and where Smith's ball came to rest would today be considered a preferred line of play, just shy of a huge fairway bunker and heathland area, setting up an optimum angle into the green. Widening the hole from the tee, introducing the areas of sand at the corner and having more teeing ground options now presents players with more strategic options than the previous hole's closed confines allowed.

Trees to the right of the fairway have also been replaced with more expanses of sand and native vegetation, leaving an uninterrupted vista across to the first hole.

Taking advantage of the natural sand base has also allowed Hanse to introduce some exquisite clusters of bunkers that protect the corners of some fairways, consistent with a heathland Sandbelt style the club and Hanse had envisaged.

“Aside from the bunkers, not a grain of sand has been added to the property to create these waste areas,” Cornell said. “All that you can see was already in existence below the layer of turf.”

New concepts members are embracing from the Hanse design include two shared fairways at the southern end, although the finishing holes (a 440m par-4, tough par-3 and the iconic 18th) provide a similarly robust consistency to the way the former layout played at the pointy end of the round.

Setting aside the element of the visual appeal that strikes you looking out from the clubhouse; looking across other holes from each fairway; and from the elevated positions at the southern end, there's no doubt the changes have substantially improved the course's strategic challenges.

The expansiveness of the playing corridors, coupled with the irrigation, turf and bunker sand replacement initiatives are also an enormous plus for the management of agronomy and water.

The long wait is over and, to borrow a line from Hanse's favourite band, it's now a case of “Let the good times roll” for the members of the Royal Sydney Golf Club. ■

