

GRAHAM MARSH DISCUSSES ROYAL PINES

By Bruce Young

The appointment earlier this year of Graham Marsh Golf Design to redesign the tournament layout at Royal Pines on the Gold Coast was perhaps no real surprise given Marsh's significant reputation in the creation of tournament layouts in Australia, his experience of working in the floodplain in which Royal Pines is located and that his office is located less than ten kilometres from the site.

I recently had the opportunity to talk with the company's owner and founder, Graham Marsh, one of Australia's most significant players of the modern era, on how he sees the project coming together and some of his visions for a layout that is about to undergo a significant change in order to accommodate the increased demands it faces in staging the Australian PGA Championship.

Q: Other than the obvious of securing further work was there any particular motivation for pursuing the role at Royal Pines?

MARSH – The fact that we had already done the third nine at Royal Pines and our name was associated with that design well then there was a desire by us to complete the other 18 to have the overall layout as a Graham Marsh Golf (GMGD) project.

Having said that perhaps the biggest motivation was that we felt the Gold Coast still needed a really high end public facility given the tourist nature of the region. To be able to have 27 holes of admittedly resort golf here, but very much improved resort golf, is important for the Coast.

The other factor of course was the PGA Championship and I think we have proven ourselves as capable of designing courses that play as resort courses or in some cases member's courses but are still very much capable of handling major

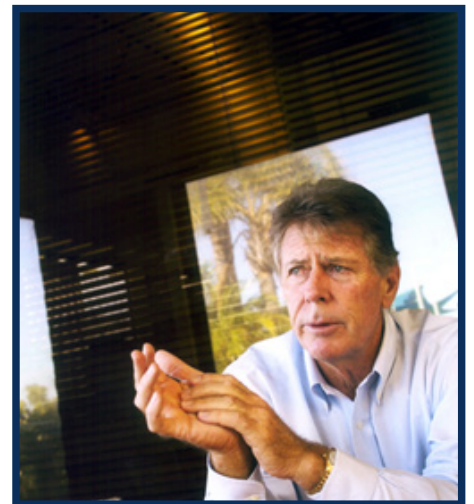


championships. I would cite the likes of Terrey Hills, The Vines Resort in Perth and the more recent Kalgoorlie Golf Course to name but a few here in Australia that have taken on the double role of high end tournament facilities but still very much user friendly golf courses for members and or/ resort play.

So if you like we have the credentials and with the Australian PGA Championship being such an important event, one of the few that remain on the Australian golfing calendar as a premier event, and my history with the PGA were further factors in wanting to be involved with the redesign.

Q: You have no doubt played the Royal Pines, socially at least. Did you have any preconceived thoughts about the layout on which you will be working before you landed the role?

MARSH – When you analyse the golf course the actual current routing is not really all that bad, especially given its location in the floodplain and the issues involved in that, although the drainage does not work well there now despite the overall immunity from the floodplain being quite good.



When it is altered the golf course will become playable on a more regular basis as the drainage improves. The current shaping really allows for little movement of water and any rain of note and the golf course becomes very damp. That will be part of the brief in any earthworks component of the redesign.

Q: Given the delicate nature of the site and the approval processes necessary and the short time windows of opportunity available this could be seen as a more demanding project in many ways than one where you begin with a fresh canvas.

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MARSH – Well you have summed it up there really. When you have a clean canvas and are not dealing with many of the sort of problems you have in floodplain projects in Queensland and the short time periods for construction involved at Royal Pines then it is fair to say there would be many less constraints but that is not to say a very successful result can't be achieved.

There is however little doubt that many people might ask when it is all over the question as to why didn't you do this or why did you do that but until you understand the complexity of the problems and what you are and are not allowed to do then it is difficult to pass judgement.

Having said that we have a very clear understanding of just what those constraints are and those we must work within but I am very confident we can achieve a very good result.

Q: The original Japanese designer perhaps met his brief in creating a very benign, user friendly resort style golf course but one that does not meet the increasing demands it has on it now.

MARSH – Of that I have no doubt and that is what I am saying that his routing actually turned out to be pretty reasonable. But that was twenty five years ago and to a large

extent it was a Japanese style of design with large bunkers and large greens on a layout where it was very comfortable for people to have an enjoyable, but not overly challenging, game of golf and to a large extent he got it spot on.

What was perhaps not catered for as well then as would be now is the drainage and if the designer then had another go now then he might do it differently again but I am not being critical of him as he likely met his brief and leaves us with a canvas that I am not fazed by.

The biggest problem in creating a significant routing change is the cost of moving waterways so, other than in one instance, we are not planning on doing that. The reason for that is the cost versus the budget, the approval processes, the potential for acid sulphate soils in lake disruption and very importantly the potential time delays.

The only hole we are considering in that regard is the current tournament 16th where we are planning on bringing the water and the green closer so the hole becomes a genuine water hole where the water is in play for the better players. I think that is an exciting part of tournament golf and although I don't like it on every hole, in this instance I think it will work well.

On other holes such as the par five 3rd (Ladies tournament layout) we will move the green closer to the water and the par five 15th off the tee we will bring that water into play by contouring in the fairway and making it more visible from the tee. The water

then becomes a factor for the very best players and that is who we want it to be for, not necessarily for the average golfer. For the average golfer and below there is already enough water in play.

Q: So what else is being looked at in the redesign?

MARSH – Every green complex their surrounds and the landing areas from the tee are to be re-contoured at this stage. The desire of the client, the PGA and certainly ours is to redo all greens and also the landing areas on the longer holes to be re-shaped with the fairway bunkering restored to a position where it will be in play for the better players.

The actual overall area of sand will be reduced significantly although at this stage we are not fully decided on the actual number of bunkers but it will certainly be more effective bunkering.

Q: There has been some discussion on the idea of a short par four as a party hole. What can you tell us about that?

MARSH – I am not interested in the use of the term party hole but rather stadium hole and certainly in my work in recent times I have tried to introduce at least one driveable par four as I personally believe that a driveable par four on any golf course of any nature I think it gives people an enormous amount of joy to play.

And that is not only for the guy who can drive the hole and make eagle and perhaps even a one but for the guy who can plot his way up the golf hole and perhaps make his one birdie in a round. It has, therefore, enormous benefits in terms of its appeal and flexibility on a golf course and I also feel that is going to be an exciting thing for people to watch.

The one we are looking at is the current par four 8th where we would

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bring the green closer to the water and with a big teeing area on the hole there is the flexibility to mix it up each day dependant on conditions and make it driveable every day.

It would also, by bringing the green forward and closer to the water, provide opportunity to open and build up areas behind the green creating a stadium effect for great viewing. The hole therefore represents a great opportunity.

Q: So having the intimate knowledge of the site you now do and the respective proposed holes are there any that stand out to you more than others.

MARSH – Firstly I have to say there is an extremely good mix of holes and getting back to the original designer he got a number of things right in terms of the corridors and the length he built into the golf course. I think we will gradually build the golf course up to somewhere over 7,300 yards in the old terms (6640 metres). Where it lacks as a test for the very good player right now however is that he or she is allowed to get away with wayward shots.

The overall plan, therefore, will be to get the better players to focus on getting their drives into the right position or zones to take advantage of the golf hole irrespective of its length. So rather than just smashing it from the tee and going and finding it they will be forced to control the ball from the tee.

Q: So even though you will be chasing more length, Royal Pines does not suffer too badly from a lack of length but rather a lack of strategy?

MARSH – Most championships are now played on golf courses that could be out to 7500 or 7600 yards and it is only a handful of golf course that have the true character to be able to test a

field near to or under 7000 yards.

Our job is to produce a golf course capable of staging an event with the significance of the PGA Championship but still retaining its playability for resort golf and the members who play there.

It's all very well for a course like the TPC at Sawgrass measuring only 7200 yards and testing the world's best because of the demands of the design but the average player is not the consideration there.

The average player really does matter here.

Q: So you are clearly very excited about what lies ahead?

MARSH – Absolutely. There are never two projects the same and each project brings its own challenges. This will keep us on our toes even when we get underway as until we open up the site after the Ladies Masters early next year we can never be totally sure of every problem we will face.

Having said that this is a great opportunity and the PGA has to be commended for moving the tournament here as it shows foresight. Whilst Coolom offered an excellent venue because it was a relaxing and nice atmosphere for people to enjoy, the event was always going to be faced with restricted growth in that particular region because of the limited number of fans and, in the long term, the number of corporate sponsors it could attract.

From that point of view the Gold Coast is a major population centre in Australia now capable sustaining itself. It is a vibrant area and destined for ongoing growth.

The one thing I will add in finishing is that we all need to be patient with this golf tournament.

While the PGA has made a great move in bringing it here there will be essentially three different courses in play over the total construction period, because of the staggered nature of the reconstruction works, before we complete the final stage. Even then it will take time for the final product to settle in because of the time it takes for the grass to mature.

The first year (November 2013) they will be playing on a golf course that I think it is fair to say is not a genuine test of championship golf. The second year it will be on a golf course that has only nine remodelled holes that have just been grown in and in the third year they will have nine holes fully established and mature and the final nine playable but still establishing itself.

So it won't be until the third year that they really start to see some real benefits from the big move they have made in bringing the event to Royal Pines. Hopefully there will be patience by all during that time to see that the final result confirms what most feel, namely that the move has been in everyone's best interest.

It is however an exciting project and one we at Graham Marsh Golf Design are delighted and proud to be involved in.

