

THE SANDBELT'S NEW STAR

A MAJOR RENOVATION PROJECT AT PENINSULA
KINGSWOOD COUNTRY GOLF CLUB HAS CREATED
TWO OF THE FINEST COURSES ON THE MELBOURNE
SANDBELT - AND THEREFORE IN AUSTRALIA.

WORDS Paul Prendergast



When an avalanche of praise follows the re-opening of a golf course after major restoration work, golfers of all descriptions generally take heed of the hype and make a mental note for future reference. When the project involves two golf courses located on the southern perimeter of the hallowed Melbourne Sandbelt, it's inevitable the broader golfing world will sit bolt upright and start making their travel plans.

As the finishing touches are applied to a multi-year project at Melbourne's Peninsula Kingswood ('PK') Country Golf Club, there is already a groundswell among members, prominent professional golfers, commentators – even major champions – suggesting that a meteoric rise to the top handful of golf courses in the country is an absolute given.

In fact, it's already there in the eyes of many. It's that good.

Highly regarded design firm Ogilvy Clayton Cocking Mead

(OCCM) – and, principally, former PK member Michael Cocking – were entrusted with the latest and most significant chapter in the evolution of the existing North and South courses that have their origins in the early 20th century; at least in the South's case,

The current-day PK is the result of the merger between the Peninsula and Kingswood Golf Clubs in 2013, the latter of which forfeited its course, the subsequent land sale providing considerable funds to transform two existing layouts and facilities into what could be considered a 21st-century Sandbelt offering, located at the gateway to the Mornington Peninsula.

Actually, the earliest thinking about further restorative work at the current property occurred before the merger took shape. The Peninsula club wanted to take affirmative action on some lingering course conditioning issues, most notably the declining standard of putting surfaces, which had become soft and infested with poa (turfgrass).

Merger deliberations then started to accelerate quite rapidly, ultimately leading to a project of epic proportions.

"The club have been brilliant really and have had a great mindset throughout the process," Cocking said, "They were always looking at the potential to make things better, rather than being concerned about what they might lose.

"The Kingswood members wanted to see something for their money and courses that were better than what they were giving up. However, some of the people who needed most convincing might have been the older Peninsula members. One of the big things was, they'd always been promised firm, fast, bent grass greens – which had never eventuated, so they'd sort of heard it all before.

"However, once we opened the first five or six holes on the South, it pretty much all changed. They couldn't believe how good they were. They were saying, 'These are the best greens

we've ever seen.' And that just gave us even more licence to do what we felt would make the golf courses better."

The large scale of the property and undulation available on the land housing the North course in particular is unlike any other on the sandbelt outside of Royal Melbourne.

OCCM's work on both layouts showcases all that is great about Sandbelt golf: superbly conditioned and contoured greens, artistically designed 'flash' bunkering and short grass surrounds. Natural sandy heathland areas and some of the best vegetation on the Sandbelt have been embellished by the removal of many hectares of introduced species and other 'weed' varieties, as Cocking put it.

What Royal Melbourne offers by way of fairway width, strategic options and preferred angles into greens is largely mirrored at Peninsula North, save for a number of more exacting tee shots that force you to aim up and execute with courage.

BELOW: The par-3 2nd on the North course plays across a valley to a green set in the opposite hill.

Course designer Michael Cocking



At around 6,000 metres on the day we visited, pure length was not at the forefront of the course's defences. Apart from the myriad challenges posed by the design itself, green speeds – running at around 12 on the Stimpmeter – and the proximity to Port Phillip Bay and therefore a prevalence of wind, are routine factors that combine to thoroughly test players' skills throughout the bag.

With more than a hint of glint in his eyes, Cocking invited us to play from some of the new back tee locations that could stretch the course to 6,400m or 6,500m to cater for the prospect of championship play in the future.

"One of the great things about the Sandbelt courses is that they're so playable day to day for the average member and yet they can still host a tournament," Cocking explained. "They really don't do anything other than firm the greens up a little and use some of the back tees."

"The idea of hosting tournaments didn't really affect our design philosophy but we really worked the angles; we wanted some pin locations tucked tight behind bunkers that force you to play to a certain side of the fairway.

"Where it did influence our mindset was that we tried to build a few extra black tees. Sometimes you don't even know they're there, it just looks like short fairway grass."



BELOW: The par-4 13th, North course.



BELOW: The 329m par-4 1st on the North course plays uphill to a two-tiered green.



The South course may not boast the North's more undulating tract of land but it's an excellent layout, with its own charm and character, nonetheless. Cocking noted the South was always the 'main' course of the two, going back to his junior days and beyond, although the recent work at the North may have switched the public perception of the two.

Cocking recalled a story told by the granddaughter of Sloan Morpeth, who designed the North course when the Peninsula club expanded to 36 holes back in the sixties. Morpeth was told: "Don't spend any time on the North, as it's only going to be a second course."

"He apparently lamented that it was on such good land, but it was interesting when we went to work, because it was really well preserved. Nobody had touched it because people hadn't paid it as much attention over the years, despite it having the potential to be the better course," Cocking said.



ABOVE: The 12th hole on the South course. Its creeks recall those at Augusta National.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The par-3 14th hole on the North course.

Today, many of the members retain a soft spot for the South and part of the overarching brief for OCCM and Cocking was to not only unearth the sandbelt features of the property housing the North, but to also make adjustments to the South that would remove something of the 'parkland' status it had earned over time.

"Other than the creeks you see on the South, there's not much difference now between the two courses in terms of a sandbelt feel," Cocking said.

"In relation to the creeks, we really hadn't planned on building any, but I found an old photo of some of the creeks at Augusta National. They had a stone wall in the bank of Rae's Creek on the 13th that made things look attractive and solved some of the maintenance issues they were having.

"We introduced a stone wall in a small section and the board loved it so much that we've introduced more and reinstated some of the creeks we found in old plans that had once existed on the South."





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: High-end accommodation welcomes stay-and-players; state-of-the-art clubhouse, range and short game facility; first-class cuisine is available in a variety of settings.

Peninsula Kingswood's pursuit of excellence extends well beyond the golf courses and the creation of a world-class short-game facility. The recently opened state-of-the-art clubhouse, complete with indoor pool, gymnasium, tennis courts and bowling green, includes eight hotel-style rooms with an additional 10 luxury cabins that establish a new standard for on-course accommodations in Australia – and, I suspect, rival those anywhere else you care to visit.

There's nothing at all austere or cramped about these lodgings; in fact, I'd liken them more to 'show home' standard in terms of the quality of features and fixtures. Bedrooms have king-size beds that can be reconfigured into two singles if required, smart TVs and balconies with course views. Spacious bathrooms include walk-in showers and baths.

House guests will be wowed by the first-class cuisine and

beverage options in a variety of well-appointed dining, veranda or lounge areas. And in the cooler months, the lure of a comfy chair in front of one of the many fireplaces dotted throughout the clubhouse will be hard to pass up.

The club's aspirations also extend to the prospect of hosting significant championships into the future and, just like Royal Melbourne, they have ample space at their disposal to comfortably cater for spectator movement, corporate hospitality and television needs.

The routing of each course, some of the amphitheatre settings and with many holes close to the clubhouse, also suggests a 'composite' layout, or layouts, are a real option for an event staged at PK.

"We've talked about a composite course and it's quite complicated to get your head around because there are so many options between the North and South," Cocking explained.

"We have a number of holes that finish around the clubhouse and can push tees back into fairways on other holes if we want, convert some holes to par-4s – there are a few opportunities like that.

"Tournaments are not the be-all and end-all for members, but for the ground staff it would be validation, I think, for the whole project. I think it would create a great buzz and show the members just how good the course is, too."

Following a recent visit to PK, 1991 Open champion Ian Baker-Finch applauded Cocking and the OCCM team for "a fantastic transformation of the North" into a demanding but also enjoyable golf course.

"I love the views they have created with some wider corridors, along with many spectacular greens. Great fun," Baker-Finch said. "I prefer the South course as a tournament test, a thoroughly enjoyable walk and Sandbelt experience with many truly great holes, green complexes and bunkering."

High praise indeed and time will tell just how good the golf courses will become as they mature over the coming years. What's not in question, though, is that Peninsula Kingswood has now been firmly thrust into the mix of any conversation about the best golf courses on the Melbourne Sandbelt and, therefore, in Australia. □