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Australian golf courses hit a rough patch

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Golf Australia says half of Australia's golf clubs are in financial distress and have 100 members or less. **Photo: Glenn Hunt**

Liam Mannix

If you were to rewrite the rules of golf for the modern age, consultant Jeff Blunden says, you'd end up with a game that looks nothing like golf. Shorter courses – a maximum of nine holes – allowing younger members with demands on their time the chance to still enjoy a hit. Foot golf, a sort of hybrid between soccer and golf in which a soccer ball is used. "It's OK golf", in which players can move balls without penalty if they land in a spot without a sightline to the hole.

Then there's "Tee It Forward", which allows players to tee off much closer to holes, and big-hole golf with bigger holes.

That's not to mention turbo golf, speed golf, express golf – the list goes on.

These so-called "hack golf" hybrids are already being employed by some clubs but "the industry is still working out how it fits into the 21st century", says Blunden, who works for Golf Business Advisory Services.

Some time around 1998, Australia hit peak golf. Club membership across the country was 500,000. That number has fallen by an average of 1.5 per cent every year since 1998, according to research commissioned by Golf Australia.

Golf's golden era was that of Greg Norman. Two years earlier, the shark had taken a six-stroke lead into the final round of the US Masters. Norman sunk two shots into water hazards, turned a six-stroke lead into a five-stroke loss, and hugged winner Nick Faldo on the 18th green.

That would be his last big performance in a major championship. He who for so long had illuminated Australian golf passed into sporting twilight. And so too has the sport.

So it's curious that Australians still obsess about a golfer who hasn't won a Major championship in two decades. Even more curious when Adam Scott has just won the US Masters. He's got a smile worth almost as much as his total prize money. A nation of 23 million has two – two! – golfers in the world top 10. And still everyone talks about the Greg Norman.

"You've got to give it time," says Australian PGA chief executive Brian Thorburn.

"Greg was the No. 1 for 331 consecutive weeks. He was top of the world for six years. Adam was the No. 1 for 13 weeks this year."

Running out of time

But golf as we know it may be running out of time. Here are the damning figures: 50 per cent of Australia's golf clubs are in "financial distress" and 51 per cent have 100 members or less, Golf Australia says. Indeed, the sport may be facing an existential crisis despite the rise of another star in Adam Scott, who won the US Masters in 2013.

Blunden says at almost every club he visits, the same problems are evident, and each is a microcosm of the transformative force ripping at the fabric of the game.

"The acceptance of the need to better fit into the consumers' choices in the 21st century has not yet fully hit home," he says.

"And if it has, questions are being asked. How does the model allow for that, can the model allow for that? In many cases it means that model has to change."

In a world of instant connection and instant gratification, golf's halting pace, its extreme learning curve, its old-world traditions and the need to spend five hours to play a round are out of place.

Golf's demographic has always been skewed towards the retired but the trend has significantly intensified in the past decade.

Golf Australia research shows participation levels are down 11 per cent since 2000. That number is deceptive. Golf's biggest age bracket is the over-65s – and among them, participation rates have held steady. The downturn is due to steep falls in participation at all age levels below that bracket. Golf Australia figures show. Participation rates in the crucial 15-to-24 age bracket have dropped from almost 6 per cent to less than 2 per cent. This missing junior generation will eventually become a missing middle-aged generation. Golf, like Australia in general, faces a looming demographic crunch.

That's not the only problem. The golden age of golf course openings well and truly passed in the middle of last century, according to a report on the game for Golf Australia. That means two things.

One, Australia's golfing infrastructure is old. Much of it was built before the Cold War. Blunden says he has seen many rural courses whose clubrooms have not been updated since they were opened.

Two, the market is saturated with golf courses. While nearly everyone interviewed for this article rejected the suggestion Australia had too many, statistics make it clear we can support few more. Fifty-one per cent of golf clubs count fewer than 100 members, figures from Golf Australia show, and 33 per cent are falling well short of their membership targets.

That means the clubs can't afford to reinvest in their facilities to reinvent themselves.

Drumbeat of bad news

The problems at the clubs has been picked up by the sport's trade papers, their articles about mergers and closures and land sales a drumbeat of bad news.

In Melbourne's outer suburbs, Chirnside Park and Eastern Golf Club have sold their courses. Capital Golf Club was sold to Crown for \$67 million this year. Burswood Golf Course in Perth closed its doors in April last year. This year, in Victoria the Sands in Torquay, Moonah Links, and Eagle Ridge on the Mornington Peninsula have all been listed for sale. Regional clubs have been the hardest hit. The merging of two clubs in Bendigo in July last year is expected by industry insiders to be the first of many. Kingswood in Dingley tried for a time to merge with Frankston's Peninsula club before it was sold to a property developer for \$125 million in September.

South-east Melbourne clubs Rosedale and Keysborough have been looking closely at their own merger.

Developer appetite for their land is unbounded and it's no wonder. Golf courses are really just wide, flat and well-maintained patches of grass, many in scenic locations. Developers pay a premium for that – as Eastern found when it sold its Doncaster course to a developer in 2011 for \$100 million.

The financial pressure is on from other quarters too: Ku-ring-gai Council on Sydney's north shore is holding community consultations over a proposal to build community and sporting facilities, new housing, shops and a park on the site of the Gordon Golf Course. It's hardly surprising. The course has required \$1 million in council funds over the past four years.

What this suggests is that councils are under pressure to find funding to invest in the community – and golf is in the firing line.

"When they prioritise, councils have to ask what the future of the sport looks like," Blunden says – and arguably facilities such as swimming pools have broader appeal.

It doesn't help golf's cause that many council-owned courses tend to be in dense residential areas with high land values.

Power and golf

Politics and sport have always gone together and never more so than in golf. It is the game of the powerful. It is the pastime of United States presidents. Nixon devoted time to improving his swing as he worked to improve his political fortunes. Clinton was noted for his willingness to bend the rules and John F. Kennedy is universally feted as the best golfer the White House has ever seen. But what if it is politics that is killing the sport?

Golf's leaders are frank in their confrontation with the challenges facing the sport.

"We haven't experienced enough growth in terms of participation and membership," admits Golf Australia chief executive Stephen Pitt. "We've had a decline in membership that's gone on for a decade.

"We do operate in a mature and quite saturated market in terms of number of clubs. The biggest challenge is making sure we have a product that's relevant for today's market, in terms of connecting with people who are generally time-poor," he says.

But because of its curiously egalitarian structure, the sport's leaders don't have the real power to make changes.

"All of the associations, they are vulnerable to the actions of the coalface," says Blunden. "They can guide, they can recommend, they can suggest, they can outline, but they can't do."

Golf Australia, the peak body, sits atop the pyramid. But the real power is held by its 1583 clubs, and they don't answer to anyone.

Pitt admits he's had trouble getting the message through to his own base.

"Golf has been a sport that's been reasonably resistant to change over a period of time but, like anything, the market tells you when you need to change. The market has told golf over the last 15 years that it needs to look at how it runs the business. It needs to get revenue from outside the current members."

Blunden agrees. "The challenge for the industry is how do you influence the decision makers who are typically even further entrenched in their view," he says. "Golf is like the Titanic, it's a slow-turning beast. It's made up of multiple generations that have different expectations and wants from it."

The clubs set the rules and dress codes and maintain standards. In some cases, the standards hark back to older times.

"At a participant level, private clubs probably have a bit more conservative perspective on some of these things, and their members like that," says Thorburn.

Crusty conservatism

Take the Royal Sydney Golf Club. It opened around the turn of last century. Its dress code is mandatory, even if you're picking up a takeaway from the clubhouse.

– contains a specific section on mobile phones:

- They must be on silent at all times;
- No phone calls on the course or clubroom, only in a specified "telephone room";
- Making or confirming diary entries on mobile phones is only permitted in the Clubhouse or Fitness Centre; and
- Texting, emailing and web browsing on mobile phones is only permitted in the men's and ladies' locker rooms ... and the computer room.

One golfer, who asked not to be named so as not to damage his relationship with his club, remembers a particularly poisonous debate. Boat shoes without socks – acceptable or not? "But that was nothing compared to when some members wanted to start wearing short socks," he laughs.

Royal Sydney is probably at the far end of the spectrum, but it is true that a certain crusty conservatism is the symbolic epithet of the sport.

"Personally, I do believe there should be a standard of some sort," says Brad Moules, training professional at the Royal Adelaide Golf Club. "Collared shirt, tailored shorts. You don't want to have a slogan on the shirt.

"You present well at our club. That's basically what we'd ask. If you're wearing shorts, you wear white socks that cover the ankle, that's all we ask."

For a sport in decline, people spend a lot of time worrying about dress codes. The difficulty golf's leaders have in directing the clubs is important because they have ideas on how to address the decline.

The first thing everybody seems to agree on is golf is far too long. Eighteen holes takes four to five hours. "I used to be a caddy here, and the same member was down here Saturday and Sunday playing golf," recalls Royal Melbourne Golf Club chief executive Paul Rak. "Our marriages wouldn't survive if we did that these days."

Which brings us back to "hack golf" in all its variations and the hope it will transform the sport into a modern day game.

"To bring new people into the game we don't want to saddle them with restraints and restrictions that make it too tough for their ability," says Thorburn.

The problem is getting that message through to the clubs. At Royal Melbourne, Rak is not a fan. "No. That's probably for the 'come and try' to get people interested in the game. The game of golf was designed as what it is, we have got to stick to that."

If that philosophy sticks, the game might well get stuck.

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