

REVIVAL OF AN 'INLAND LINKS'

By Stuart McLean

Maccauvlei Golf Club has been restored to its former Classic glory

There has always been a certain timelessness about Maccauvlei Golf Club, that curious “inland links” on the Free State side of the Vaal River. Some of the rooms inside the clubhouse transport you back to another era, when this was one of the most fashionable clubs in South Africa. Studying the modern photograph of the clubhouse, taken from the 18th green, it’s easy to imagine the laid-back atmosphere that existed here from the 1920s to the 1940s, when Maccauvlei hosted the country’s leading golfers in four SA Open championships, and also entertained the elite of Johannesburg society.

Remarkably enough, belonging to Maccauvlei in those pre-war days held such a cachet that in 1930-31 the total membership reached a peak of 1 200, and the club was evidently listed in the Guinness Book of Records as having the largest membership of any golf club in the world. Its fame was so widespread that Maccauvlei silk ties were a prized item at the Tie Shop in London.

The Reef mining magnates and their friends loved nothing better on a weekend to travel by train from Johannesburg to Maccauvlei station, where they would disembark to enjoy five-star hospitality at the club’s Dormy House, and play the course at their leisure.

There’s no longer a “Next stop Maccauvlei”, but the Dormy House, now part of Anglo-American’s Central Training Unit, is very much still there, and a welcome awaits any golfer wishing to stay and play at the new-look Maccauvlei.

New is perhaps not the appropriate word for what has been happening there in the last year or so. The course has rather been “restored to its former glory by designer Peter Matkovich, who has taken a keen personal interest in an unusual project that differs enormously from his modern layouts.

The original architect, Englishman George Peck, built Maccauvlei alongside the Vaal River on a unique wilderness site of sandy wasteland, akin to a seaside links with ridges and undulations. It took its name from

the spurwing geese that populated the area, known as “ Wilde Makoue”. Opened in 1926, the design was refined a few years later by Colonel SV Hotchkin, the man who gave us the Humewood Golf Club links.

Hotchkin referred to Maccauvlei as a “ real seaside course” and it instantly became known as the only “ inland links “ in the world. Due to the Hotchkin connection, reciprocity exists to this day between Humewood and Maccauvlei members.

However, in more recent times the famous old course had lost some of its character and original charm. Many of the old bunkers had been filled in during the 1960s. The bent grass greens had outlived their lifespan and were presenting problems. A flood in 1996 badly damaged five of them. The club committee and members began to realize that the golf club was sadly also losing its status.

At a special general meeting in July, 1998, the members voted in favour of upgrading the course. Initially the Gary Player Design Group was consulted, but their proposal and fees were beyond the club’s budget, and Matkovich was commissioned to do the job instead.

As former club captain, president and chairman Dereck Mocke records in his wonderful history of Maccauvlei, Matkovich was full of praise for the original designers as true professionals, and did not foresee any major changes, or modernization work. He decided rather to retain the course’s links origins that had built its reputation.

The only hole he changed in its entirety was the tenth, which was played from an awkward tee built on the other side of the road to the Dormy House. He moved it further left towards the 18th , using up the club’s old practice area to create a tricky dogleg hole with a green tucked away behind a stand of trees. What Matkovich has done in the main is emphasise an old fashioned style of bunkering, which was always a feature of Maccauvlei in earlier days, and remove superfluous water hazards that he thought were not in keeping with the original design. Many of the members loved their pond next to the green of the par-5 18th , and are not altogether happy with the large bunker that now frames the green.

In fact, several older members are far from complimentary about some of the changes introduced by Matkovich. They would have preferred modern bunkering of the kind he has built on his estate courses, rather than those he has given them, where your lie in the sand can be anything

but predictable. But then again his brief from club captain Gerard Tait, who co-coordinated the project, was to restore rather than rebuild.

The new bunkering is notable in that it features jagged edges, and exotic wild grasses are being grown around the to provide that rough, natural look that typifies a famous course like Pine Valley in the United States. In time, perhaps for the club's 75th anniversary in 2001, they will lend the layout a splendidly rugged appearance.

To save costs, the club undertook most of the construction work with the assistance of the neighbouring New Vaal Colliery. The course itself is said to lie above a rich seam of coal. Greenkeeper Justis Vorster built the large greens himself from Matkovich's plans, and the club saved pots of money by lifting the kikuyu grass from the fairways and resodding it around the new greens.

Maccavlei's greatest strength as a golf course, and one that has always endeared itself to golfers over the last 70 odd years, is the natural beauty and charm of the place, its trees and sandy areas off the fairways. It's just across the river from Vereeniging, but it's essentially a world apart from the industrialised Vaal Triangle.

The layout is not particularly long by the championship standards of today, yet it includes some peerless holes that have stood the test of time. Matkovich has improved on some of them, such as the par-5 second, where he has retained the water hazard, but removed it dangerously close to the green.

The front nine has an intriguing variety of holes, possibly the toughest collection on the course. A feature of the uphill short par-4 third hole is the small Boer War graveyard of remembrance hidden among trees next to the green.

You should certainly score better on the picturesque back nine that rambles down towards the river, but water hazards do come into play more frequently as the terrain changes. The par-5 15th running along the riverbank now has a new green moved closer to the water.

One of the most famous holes at Maccavlei for many years has been the par-4 17th, with its giant bunker sloping up from the fairway towards an elevated green. Again, Matkovich has moulded them closer together, so that the hazard is more of a threat to the modern golfer.

The club went through some trying times during the restoration, but the decision to retain the course's classic look will ensure it's unique standing in South African golf.

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