Entry type: Organisation
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McLeod Country Golf Club

(1968 -)

Born	19680101, Mt Ommaney Queensland Australia
Occupation	Sporting Organisation, Sporting Venue

Summary

The McLeod Country Golf Club as founded in 1968 with the establishment of the first 9 holes. The 18 hole course was completed by 1972. Located in the western suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland, it is the only golf club in the southern hemisphere managed by female members. The club welcomes both females (Members) and males (Fellows) and has recently commenced a proactive program to encourage juniors.

Details

When organised women's golfing competition was in its infancy in Australia, even some well informed men championed the benefits of the sport for women. Renowned golfer D. G. Soutar, the 1903 Amateur Champion of Australasia, who went on to publish The Australian Golfer and then design Melbourne, Victoria's famous Kingston Heath course, commented in 1903 that, 'I am pretty well convinced that the majority of women who follow the game…like it, first and foremost, for the healthy open-air exercise it affords.' According to Soutar improved physical well-being wasn't the only benefit to be enjoyed by women from a round of golf. 'It promotes a habit of self control,' he noted, 'which is not often consciously developed by women, and it steadies the nerves. It takes women out of themselves,' he continued, 'and acts as a gentle counter-poise to tea and gossip.'

Sixty years later, it wasn't tea that a handful of Queensland women golfers were imbibing as they 'gossiped', but Christmas drinks. Associates of the Ashgrove and Keparra clubs were in animated discussion about the prospect of establishing a golf club open to all, but controlled by women. They were tired of the access restrictions placed on women, who could never be more than associate members of gold clubs. Given that many of them were professionals and members of the paid workforce, the restrictions rankled even more; women were rarely, if ever, given weekend access. The redoubtable Kathleen Atherton who, a couple of years earlier, had raised the idea at a meeting of the Queensland Ladies' Golf Union (QLGU) to a lukewarm response, was probably amongst their number. In the intervening years, she had found a willing ally in Hilda Reid, secretary to the Chairman of the Southern Electricity Authority of Queensland. The two of them formed the nucleus of a hard-working group of women who lobbied for support, looked for land and raised public awareness.

At the same time the largest private real estate development in Australia was transforming land with Brisbane River frontage near Mt Ommaney, eight kilometers southwest of Brisbane. The Centenary Estates residential housing development had endured a slump in the early 1960s but had recovered momentum by 1965. An ambitious project, it was given Brisbane City Council approval on the proviso that the developers, among other things, financed a new bridge across the Brisbane River, a freeway that connected the bridge to the main road system and the development of an 18 hole golf course. Sixty hectares of flood prone, riverfront land was earmarked for the purpose. The developers were keen to see the course built; they knew it would add to the attractiveness of the surrounding residential blocks that they were trying to sell. They just didn't want to take on the expense of doing so. Therefore, in 1966 they advertised that they would sell the land for $1 in exchange for the purchaser's undertaking to build the course.

These two seemingly unrelated courses of events became connected when, in November 1966, a former President of the Ashgrove Golf Club, Jim Newborough, drew Kathleen and Hilda's attention to the advertisement. They quickly arranged an inspection (Kathleen was a geographer and capable of making a well informed assessment) and were pleased by what they saw. Encouraged to do so by Peter Lightfoot, a senior executive of the property development company, they convened a public meeting at the Ashgrove Golf Club on January 16, 1967 to gauge the level of support that a women's golf club might receive. The novelty of the event attracted a high level of media attention, and Hilda took full advantage of the opportunity that the occasion presented. She explained the idea to reporters from the Brisbane Telegraph.

'Our idea is a golf club run in reverse to the present general set up, where women players are restricted to cut playing times. We don't want our venture to be a Women's Only club, and will welcome men players. But we do want it to be a club where women golfers can play as often as they like, and not cut to restricted, blocked times, especially at the weekends as they are now at most crowded metropolitan clubs…We have found there is a growing band of women golfers, business and professional women, who can't play on the mid-week days set aside as most clubs for associate competition.'

Hilda even encouraged detractors and critics to attend. 'We want as many as we can get to this meeting, knockers as well as supporters…so that a clearer picture may be drawn of the possibilities of launching the venture.' Needless to say, despite the presence of critics, the meeting only served to convince Kathleen and Hilda that they were on the right track and that if they built the club it would succeed.

The road from this meeting to eventual land acquisition was by no means a smooth one. Despite eventually receiving support from state and national golfing organizations to pursue the idea, and despite working hard to gather community support from all around the state for the concept of a club for and controlled by women, there were many influential people, who could not see how it would work and therefore did not want to invest in the idea. Amongst them was Sir Arthur Fadden, former Prime Minister and Treasurer, and the presiding Chairman of the Centenary Estates Board of Directors. He and other board members had not approved of the publicity that the public meeting had generated and feared that women did not have the requisite business skills required to see the venture succeed. They were concerned that enabling the idea would see the company become a laughing stock and that this would have a detrimental effect on land sale targets.

Peter Lightfoot was clearly more of a visionary than the members of the board he reported to. He finally convinced them to allow the women a six month option on the land, expiring in January 1968. Acceding to this request, the board imposed one important condition. The word 'women's' could not appear in the name of the club. Scrapping the proposed name of the Mt Ommaney Women's Golf Club was a small price for the steering committee to pay – but what to use in its place? The committee, comprising of Hilda Reid, Kathleen Atherton, Gwen Osterlund, Marge Irvine, Muriel Pottage and Pat Herd, still wanted a name that promoted the course as a place for women's golf.

They decided upon naming the club in honour of a woman who was never an elite golfer but who had, nevertheless, dedicated most of her adult life to golf administration. Gertrude McLeod was an Associate member of the Royal Queensland

Golf Club and President of the Indooroopilly Golf Club Associates. She was President of the Queensland Ladies' Golf Union for thirty years, its first life member and the first Queenslander to be President of the Australian Ladies' Golf Union. She served as Vice-President of the English Ladies' Golf Union. She was a firm and forthright supporter of the project and willingly gave her name to the new venture.

The first year of 'operation' was challenging, particularly the six months leading up to the expiration of the option in January 1968. At its best, public reaction to the project was patronizing, at worst it was derisory and reflected the common view that even during the weekend, a woman's place was in the home. A journalist from the Melbourne Age, hinting at the real gender politics that shaped the issue of women's access to weekend golf, shared his thoughts:

'For many years one of the simplest ways for Dad to escape from Mum and the kids at weekends has been for him to announce that he has lined up a game of golf with his friends. Male friends, of course. Women couldn't do the same. Most clubs don't want women to play on weekends. Most men don't want to babysit on their days off.'

Allowing women access to sport on the weekends meant that men would have to take on domestic responsibilities that they had hitherto been able to avoid; the Age journalist clearly saw the Brisbane ladies' proposal to be the thin end of the wedge.

Apart from the problems with public perception there were pressing practical concerns, chiefly the need to raise a loan to proceed with the development of the land before their option ran out. The steering committee, despite its comprising of several women with well established professional and business credentials, encountered a lot of closed doors as they approached financial institutions for a loan. In this era, women trying to raise funds for home mortgages and businesses found things difficult at the best of times; raising money to build a golf course when all you had as collateral was 60 acres of flood prone land was nigh on impossible. Eventually, the State Government Insurance Office (SGIO) came to the party, approving a loan for $40,000 over fifteen years at 7% interest. Significant conditions were imposed; five committee members were required to take out life insurance policies with SGIO to cover the amount of the loan. And the loan could only be drawn upon after the committee had spent $8,000 of its own funds.

But at least they had the commitment before option expiry date, which meant that it was time to hold a general meeting to officially form the club and have the Memorandum and Articles of Association approved. On February 28, 1968, this meeting was held and the McLeod Country Golf Club, the purpose of which was '…to establish, maintain and carry on a golf club for both men and women players and their families…', was formed. Membership clauses that stipulated that the number of Fellows could never exceed 45% of the full membership protected women's interests, ensuring that the club, although open to all, would always be controlled by women. The course would be challenging only, in an Australian first, it would be designed with the needs of women golfers in mind. 'Our aim is to make McLeod a Championship course for women but not at the expense of the average golfer and always keeping in mind the length of the course.'

All the committee needed to do now was raise their own funds and start spending them. Signing up members was an obvious revenue source, but this needed to be handled carefully; members would allow some period of grace but they would want some part of the course to be playable before the year was out. The committee had to manage the inflow and outflow of funds on a weekly basis to ensure the development tasks, such as building a dam, could proceed apace. Members and potential members needed to see that they weren't signing up to a white elephant. Fundraising efforts were many and varied; the committee held Walk-a-Thons, fundraising parties, talent shows and German beer nights.

They even entered television quiz shows that offered contestants cash prizes. In September 1968, Hilda Reid, Rae McKenzie and Stella McMinn entered Play Your Hunch, a show that required contestants to tell the story of an unlikely event that had actually happened to them, with a panel having to guess who it happened to. The McLeod team decided to choose a story from Rae McKenzie's catalogue of Northern Australian stories. Originally from Mt Isa in northern Queensland, Rae had numerous crocodile hunting experiences and the team settled on one of these. The panel failed to guess the origin of the story correctly, so the McLeod team came away $40 richer and with three tea sets that were used by the club for many, many years. The women of the McLeod Country Club committee were a remarkably resourceful bunch!

Eventually, after a number of legal hitches and frustrating hold ups, the club, Brisbane City Council, SGIO and Centenary Estates Co. came to terms and agreed that the women should take control of the land. A memorable ceremony took place on September 21, 1968, under trees near the site of the ninth green. Peter Lightfoot presented the signed agreement to Kath Atherton, Sir Arthur Fadden, who once opposed the idea wholeheartedly, applauded enthusiastically. And Kath Atherton, floated the idea five years earlier, reflected on the meaning of the occasion.
'What do you see? You see first a dam, admittedly not much water in it yet; a diversion channel with scarcely any grass on it; greens and tees in embryo stage. But we see a vision, a dream about to be realized…'

The Mcleod Country Club still thrives and remains the only female run golf club in the southern hemisphere. It's amazing what a group of 'gossipy' women, 'taken out of themselves' and with 'habits of self control' can do.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book
Women on Course: The McLeod Country Golf Club, 1968-1993, Gregory, Helen and Kowald, Margaret, 1993

Site Exhibition
She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html

Resource Section
McLeod, Gertrude Evelyn (1891 - 1971), Kowald, Margaret, 2006, http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A160604b.htm

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