

Golf Architecture

A WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE

VOLUME THREE

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The Gunnamatta course: The Golf Club St Andrews Beach, Australia

Tom Doak



One of the major appeals for me about working in overseas markets has been to spend time in places where golf-course design is still about the game of golf.

In America, I sometimes wonder where the game of golf has drifted. Peripheral issues such as cart-path location, residential-lot development, environmental issues and tournament-level play, are often driving the decisions behind the design of new courses. Our older and revered golf clubs still have the fundamentals right, but they are few and far between, and some are starting to succumb to the pressure to come up to 'modern standards'.

Thus, it was a pleasure to arrive in Australia six years ago, with my then-associate Tom

Mead, to walk the site for The Golf Club St Andrews Beach. I had been to the Melbourne sandbelt three times before, but it was our consulting work at places such as Garden City Golf Club that caught the attention of our client, who discovered this property and knew that I had tried to get one of the two design commissions at The National Golf Club. The assumption was made (correctly) that I would be eager to show what it had missed in passing me over.

For all potential new projects, and especially those far away from home, I insist on seeing a topographical map of the property before visiting a site for the first time—one hundred hectares of ground is really a very large parcel, if you don't have some direction

to guide you around. I was provided a topo map overlaid on a colour aerial photo of the site—the best base map I had ever received—so by the time we arrived in Australia I knew more about the site than normal. The tree-covered ridges within the property block most of the views off-site, so there were few places where we had to consider the visual background for the hole in placing our greens.

I had routed twenty-seven holes on the topo map before I left America, but I didn't want my new client to think I did my routing work strictly from plans. So, for the first two days we walked around the site and talked about the goals for the project, and I didn't mention that I had done a routing already.

OPPOSITE: The Golf Club St Andrews Beach (Gunnamatta Course), Gunnamatta, Victoria, Australia. Course architect: Tom Doak. The long, second shot into the par-4 third hole, with the left half of the green hidden behind the big dune short and left of the putting surface. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE: The view from the left side of the thirteenth hole: the longest par-4 at St Andrews Beach, with a green at the end of a perfect long valley. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

We all agreed that the ideal course would be a bit like Royal Melbourne, with wide landing-areas for member play and great holes of all lengths: strong par-4s, which would test the low handicappers, mixed with short par-4s full of undulation and character; a great set of short holes for everyone; and short par-5s that each group would enjoy from their own perspective.

Finally, on the third morning, Tom Mead and I went out with Ian Baker-Finch to walk the holes I had laid out beforehand. It was one of the best days I've ever had in the business. The Gunnamatta course was just laying there waiting for us; I can still remember the tone of Ian's voice when he asked to reconfirm whether I had really figured all that out in America?

And then, for more than three years, it looked like the deal was going to fall apart, and that we would never get to build the Gunnamatta. The client's business plan included twenty-seven holes of golf, plus some housing development along the northern edge of the property. The golf course would have been easy to permit, but the

client was playing 'hardball' with the local council to approve the housing, and when it failed to gain approval the investors regrouped and decided to proceed with thirty-six holes. While I was back in America the group pursued the approvals with a local designer. I was kept out of the loop.

Luckily, I was busy with other good things. We were building Pacific Dunes in Oregon, and when it was finished, my name was in golf magazines around the world. Our success in Oregon led us to be contacted by Greg Ramsay about the job at Barnbogle Dunes in Tasmania, and when we agreed to do that job, in association with Michael Clayton Golf Design, it was clear that we were committed to working in Australia. This led to being recontacted, through Michael, about our interest in getting re-involved at St Andrews Beach. Michael and his staff worked on revising my initial twenty-seven-hole routing to accommodate the new thirty-six-hole plan, and we agreed to terms.

Not much reworking was required to incorporate the additional nine holes. Nearly all of the holes on the Gunnamatta were part

of my original plan. The tenth and eleventh holes had to be re-routed to preserve the Moonah trees along the ridge in the eastern end of the site; and we added the par-3 sixteenth hole, along with moving the tee for the par-5 seventeenth—to string the holes together in a different order. Originally, the fifteenth of the Gunnamatta hooked into the third hole of the Fingal, as the Composite routing will play.

Only two holes required any earthmoving in the fairways—the thirteenth and fifteenth—and I knew we could finish those in a matter of days. I proposed the possibility of bringing my entire crew from America and, working with Michael Clayton's crew, shaping the entire golf course in one month. I'm still convinced we could have done the job that way, but the client wanted to proceed more cautiously, so my associate Brian Slawnik spent four months on site before the last bunker was dug and the fairways were planted. I made only two trips during construction, but in the fourteen days I was on site, we built every one of the eighteen greens as well as completing the fairway work.





OPPOSITE: An unwelcoming bunker guards the green at the medium-length, par-3 sixth hole. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

ABOVE: The short, par-3 eleventh hole is played across a valley, to a green favouring a shot sliding from left to right. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

RIGHT: The fearsome, greenside bunker at the difficult, par-4 tenth hole. Following a pair of short par-4s, this hole will test the long-iron prowess of all but the most powerful-hitting golfers. (Photo by David Scaletti.)







The Gunnamatta course is a throwback to the sandbelt courses, which were built in the late-1920s and 1930s. The routing takes advantage of excellent topography, and the personality of the holes is accented by the shaping of the greens and bunkers. It was as simple a construction job as I have ever participated in, and therefore the highest expression of my minimalist philosophy. The only property I have seen that required less work is Sand Hills, Coore and Crenshaw's Nebraska masterpiece.

Keeping things simple often means going against 'progress', and there are often questions from our clients about doing so. For example, we did not build 'USGA greens', as many clubs do today in an effort to keep up with the latest technology. The USGA greens profile was invented to create a standard for courses where native soils could not be used on the greens, but it is not a superior alternative for good soils, and several of our best projects in the United States have native soil greens, including Pacific Dunes. St Andrews Beach has perfect native soils for turfgrass management, so there was no more point to

importing soil for the greens than there would be at Royal Melbourne or Kingston Heath.

Our grassing scheme is also somewhat unusual; instead of maintaining hybrid couch on the fairways year-round, our fairways will be a mix of warm and cool-season turf. With all the natural undulations in our fairways, we did not want the ball to always run to the bottom of a hollow during the couch's dormant season; we have chosen a slightly fuzzier playing surface so that golfers will have to deal with a variety of stances for

their approach shots. The irrigation system is also a throwback to earlier days.

There are no cart-paths at St Andrews Beach, and we hope there never will be. I am all in favour of the use of golf carts by golfers who physically require them, but that is not enough traffic to cause turf issues. I hope that Australian golf can hold off the relentless 'progress' of golf-cart salesmen who have taken the exercise and pleasant experience out of the game in America only so that golf course operators can make a few extra bucks. I sincerely hope St Andrews Beach remains a

The fourteenth hole is a driveable par-4, but only for especially long-hitting golfers. This is the view from short of the fairway bunker positioned in the middle of the fairway. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE: A view of the pitch to the ninth green: beside the left-hand fairway bunker. (Photo by David Scaletti.)







model for that philosophy. However, if cart use eventually becomes more prevalent, I would prefer to see the tee-to-fairway traffic routes irrigated, rather than paved.

From the standpoint of playing character, the Gunnamatta course features small greens, mainly because we don't get much opportunity to build small greens anymore. American developers are hoping for heavy play, and most golf-course superintendents express their preference for larger greens to spread out the wear and tear. Bigger greens also mean bigger maintenance budgets, but this factor rarely enters the discussion. I believe smaller greens are the way of the future in design, simply because they are one way to focus on precision, rather than length. The smallish greens and wide fairways will likely lead many first-time visitors to conclude that the Gunnamatta is a 'second-shot course', but the same has also been said of Royal Melbourne, Pinehurst No. 2 and Augusta National. Hopefully, after playing a few rounds, players will agree that their second shots are much easier when they drive the ball in the right part of the fairway, and that

OPPOSITE: Driving down the right side of the short, par-4 fourteenth hole is safer, but from down below, the pitch up to the green is 'blind' and difficult to judge. The ideal tee-shot line is long and left. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE: The greenside bunker at the medium-length, par-4 seventh hole, with its two-tiered green. Only a genius could get close to a back pin location from here. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

short-game skills will also play a significant role in scoring.

The last aspect of St Andrews Beach worth mentioning is our unique approach to the problem of distance control, which is one of the most vexing problems facing architects today. I am firmly convinced that ninety-eight per cent of golfers would prefer that modern golf courses *do not* provide a set of back tees in excess of 7,000 yards; perhaps only two per cent of players are good enough to play from that length, and even some of them would welcome the opportunity to post a lower score, instead of fighting to make pars. But most developers are convinced that a course cannot be rated as 'great' unless it is of championship length and difficulty, so nearly all of our clients are constantly harping about finding a few more back-tee opportunities. Not surprisingly, visiting golfers are then goaded into playing the course from too far back to really enjoy the game.

At St Andrews Beach, the client asked us to design a Composite routing of the two eighteens for championship play, in the spirit of Royal Melbourne—though Royal Melbourne

was not originally designed with this in mind. We accepted this request as a rare opportunity to keep both of the eighteens at a reasonable length for the single-digit handicap member. The Composite course will include most of the longer holes from the two eighteens, and measure over 7,000 yards with a par of seventy-one. The Gunnamatta and the Fingal, however, are just 6,700 yards each; they will play a bit longer than on paper, because par is seventy on the Gunnamatta and seventy-one on the Fingal. I believe this will be a popular decision among the members for years to come, no matter what happens to the specifications of the golf ball.

I write this story as though I did all the work myself, but that was far from the case. The course has come together so quickly and so well on the talents of others, and I do want to recognise their roles. Brian Slawnik was my lead associate, with shaping assistance from Eric Iverson, Brian Schneider and Jason McCarthy. From Michael Clayton's office, Michael Cocking did most of the plan drawing and some field supervision, while Bruce Grant and John Sloan each lent their

expertise in the construction and grassing. Last but not least, our thanks to Murray Hey and Peter Longmuir for allowing us build things the way we thought best, and to Suzie Hendra for helping with the environmental process and for helping us get along in a foreign land. Also, to John Geary and his assistants for transforming our earth sculptures into a great playing surface.

Over the past two years we have had the opportunity to participate in three projects in New Zealand and Australia. Each of them was a special site, each completely different to the other two. To date, Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and now Barnbogle Dunes in Tasmania have received the lion's share of the publicity, due to their spectacular visuals, but it has always been my thought that the Gunnamatta would prove to be the most enjoyable of our courses to play on an everyday basis. Hopefully, as we build the Fingal course, I will find enough free time to see for myself if that is the case.



At the drive-and-pitch ninth hole, golfers need a well-placed drive followed by a perfectly judged wedge, to a tiny green. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE ABOVE LEFT:
An image of the seventh hole from the tee. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE ABOVE RIGHT:
The long, second shot into the par-4 thirteenth hole. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE BELOW LEFT:
The pitch into the par-5, seventeenth hole—one of only two long holes on the Gunnamatta Course. (Photo by David Scaletti.)

OPPOSITE BELOW RIGHT:
The bunker short and right of the long, par-3 fourth hole. (Photo by David Scaletti.)



