



The guru of golf: an Indian perspective

Phil Ryan



In the north-east of India in November 2004, the Royal Calcutta Golf Club celebrated its 175th birthday. Although the actual golf course has changed in both position and design over the years, it is the oldest golf club outside of the British Isles.

Bangalore Golf Club in the south of India was established in 1876, on land previously used as a rifle range by the British Pioneer Regiment and was likely set up as a nine-hole layout. There is an eighteen-hole golf course on the exact same site today with a membership of over 1,000 very dedicated Indian golfers.

Set in the vale of Kashmir at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains is the town of

Gulmarg, where in 1904 the British set up a links-style golf course. At an altitude of 2,730 metres above sea level, this eighteen-hole layout ranks as the highest golf course with grass greens in the world.

India does not immediately come to the minds of most golfers from around the world, but to anyone who has visited the country, its golfing history and passionate golfing fraternity rivals that of Scotland. The British occupation of India left many legacies, both good and bad, but visit any one of the nearly two hundred golf courses in India today, and you would be hard pressed to find anyone who does not bless this foreign intrusion that has come to dominate many of their

lives. Indian golfers do not just love the game: they live the game.

Having been established mostly through the efforts of British military-types, a lot of the golf courses still exist today as part of military bases; not surprisingly, many Indian military officers are enthusiastic exponents of the noble game. Once, when planning a new golf course, I visited an army base in the town of Bhubaneswar—the capital of Orissa State—which had the only golf course in town. The club had forty-seven members, including several from the civilian population, and it only operated on weekends. The golf course consisted of a nine-hole layout, which started near the main road; the approach called on a

OPPOSITE: Delhi Golf Club, New Delhi, India. Course architect: Public Works and Horticultural department (1928); extended to twenty-seven holes (1931); redesigned by Peter Thomson (1977); since redesigned by Ron Fream and Col Bugga. View down the tenth hole from tees, with one of the Lohdi Tombs alongside. (Photo by Phil Ryan, Pacific Coast Design.)

shot to a green in the middle of the parade ground. The course was without bunkers. The tee for the second hole was next to the green, and the line of play was up to, then over, a two-storey barracks building that was marked with a white dotted line up the building and over the roof. Now that's dedication to the game!

This type of dedication is not restricted to any one part of India and even resulted in the birth of a unique golfing group, The Addicts Golfing Society of Southern India, whose motto is: 'Easy does it'.

With prohibition in force in Madras (now Chennai) during 1948, those wishing to take a drink of alcohol had to fill out a form declaring themselves to be self-confessed addicts, which then allowed them a restricted permit. This permit status then allowed the golfers of Madras to entertain their fellow golfers from Bangalore who did not suffer the same restrictions on their social drinking and were loathe to come all the way to Madras, play golf, then, go home without a visit to the nineteenth hole.

The annual matches between Bangalore

Golf Club and Madras Gymkarna Club, known as The Interclub Match trophy, commenced in 1878, with competitors travelling by horseback to the event. To my knowledge, it remains the longest running golf match in the world, involving both home and away matches each year. As a highly social group with a membership nearing one thousand, The Addicts Golfing Society is still thriving today and has extended its golfing program to many cities in the south.

For the past forty years golf has been governed in India by the IGU (Indian Golfing Union), who conduct tournaments, such as, the All India Amateur Golf Championship, which is one of the longest running golf tournaments in the world, and the Indian Open, nearly forty years old itself. The IGU is also instrumental in junior programs, rules seminars, training camps, selection funding for national teams competing around the world, along with the general promotion of the game.

Many of the current Indian golf professionals have developed from IGU programs; some of these are now making a name for

themselves, and India, throughout the world.

Most of the early golf courses in India were 'browns', that is, there were no formal grass fairways. Golfers had to tee-up on all shots using cardboard tees over usually rocky ground, to greens that consisted of sand mixed with oil. Caddies would rake the green prior to putting. You can still find examples of these courses in smaller cities around the country, but over the past fifteen years many have now converted to grass fairways and greens. The design of these courses was entirely driven by natural circumstances. So, when I first visited India in 1974, I saw some amazing layouts where playing over, or around obstacles, was 'par for the course' and eighteen holes could easily fit into fifty acres of land.

Of the older golf courses in India, the Delhi Golf Club more than holds its own against the newer golf courses. It boasts twenty-seven holes laid out over 177 acres and set among nine historical monuments from the Lodhi period. First established in 1950, the golf course is a pioneer of environmental stewardship with 300 bird species having been identi-



fied. Both deer and peacock roam freely across the course. The reputation of the course is built on its tight fairways lined with severe scrub, along with its backdrop of magnificent trees. Set in the middle of Delhi, the course provides a haven from the bustling city for its membership of nearly 3,500.

Traditionally when the 'browns' started to be converted to grassed golf courses, the greens were constructed with local soil. Combined with the hot environment of India,

these two elements ensured some very hard and quick putting surfaces, even though they were planted with local doob grass—a variety of Bermuda grass.

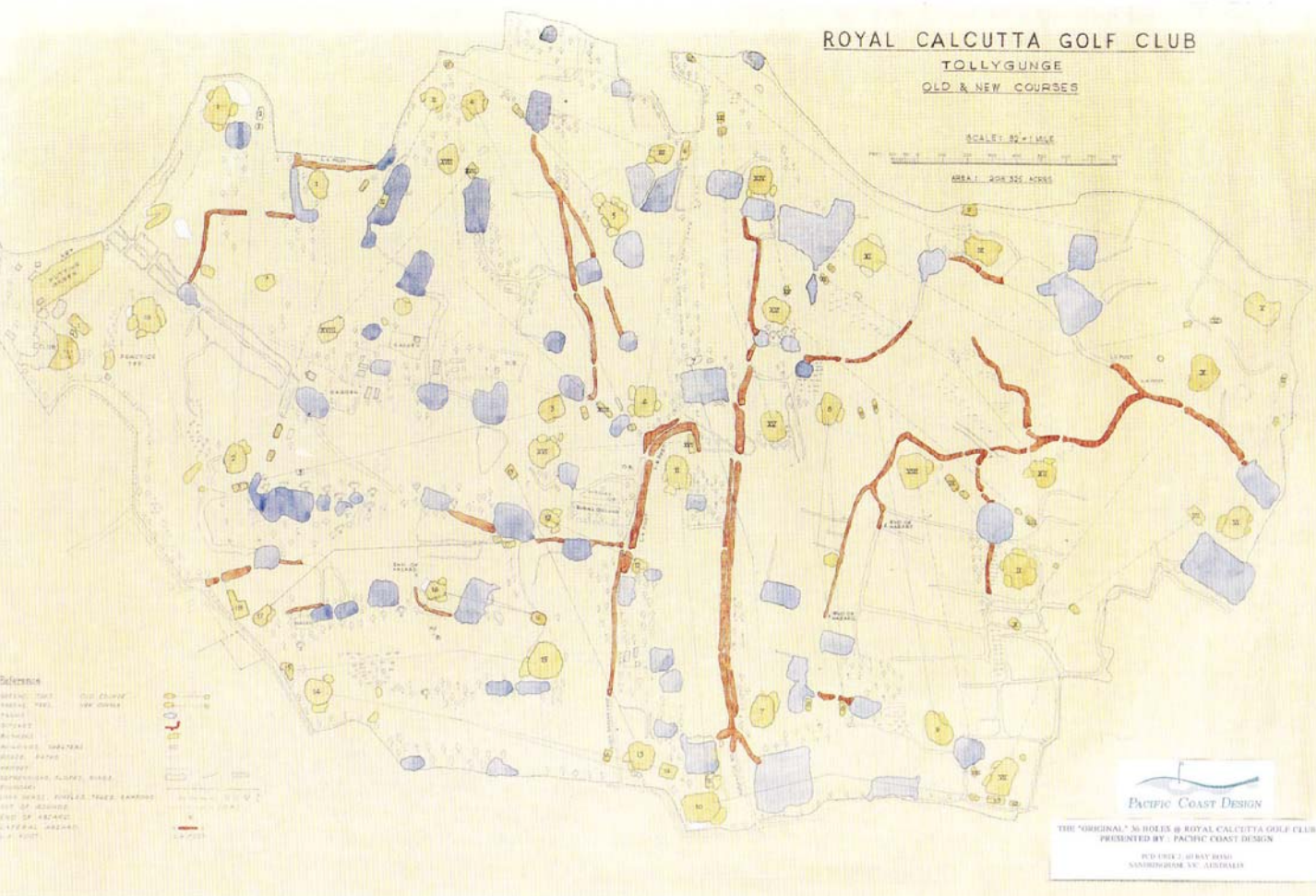
The fairways also were mostly local doob grass on hard soil surfaces that rarely saw a regular watering, other than monsoon rains. This style of course lent itself to a hit-and-run form of golf, rather than the more 'aerial' version played today. As both construction and maintenance were primarily manual tasks,

any bunkering was done more in the style of the early 1900s. This involved excavation of shallow dugouts, with the soil excavated being used to create height mounding between the bunker and green.

Water hazards on the old golf courses only came into play during the monsoonal season. For the rest of the year, these zones provided some very interesting recovery shots for golfers. Caddies have always played an important role in Indian golf—even today most golf

ABOVE LEFT Unitech Karma Lakelands Golf Course, Manesar, New Delhi, India. Course architect: Phil Ryan. View from the tee of the par-3 second hole. (Photo by Phil Ryan.)

ABOVE RIGHT: Poona Club Golf Course, Pune, India. Course architect: Phil Ryan. Construction of the eighteen-hole golf course was managed entirely with manual labour in 1995. (Photo by Phil Ryan.)



Royal Calcutta Golf Club, Calcutta, India. Course architects: unknown. A plan of the 'original' thirty-six holes as found in a Calcutta bookshop, restored and presented back to the club by Phil Ryan. (Courtesy of Phil Ryan.)

courses have them—and at many, the role of caddy has been passed from father to son. In the earlier times on the frontier golf courses, a military officer would take both caddy and gun-bearer, just in case they were confronted by wild boar. If you get the opportunity to play in India and are offered a caddy, take my advice: accept! This person will serve as an indispensable guide during the round,

although a gun-bearer would be optional nowadays.

During the early 1990s, India commenced opening up its economy and moving away from its socialist roots adopted in the post-Second World War/Independence period. This provided the impetus for many new golf courses to come to fruition, and older golf courses to start expanding, redeveloping and

attracting the growing middle-class who had not been exposed to golf previously. Golfing equipment—once prohibitively priced due to very high tariffs—was now available and getting more affordable. The first of the newer golf courses to open with sand-based greens, good Bermuda grass surfaces, modern bunkering and irrigation systems, was the Poona Club Golf Course designed in 1995 by Pacific Coast Design in the city of Pune. This project was soon followed by the Jack Nicklaus-designed Classic Golf Course and the DLF Golf Course designed by Arnold Palmer—both in New Delhi. Another Pacific Coast Design golf course, Eagleton Golf Village, materialised in the southern city of Bangalore, and then Royal Springs Golf Club designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr followed in the northern city of Srinagar.

The newer golf courses are all eighteen holes, or more, stretching out over large areas of land and incorporating many of the modern design features of golf courses from around the world. In the case of DLF, this includes night lighting on the golf course. Like many other countries, important golf-related issues: water; the environment;

and maintenance practices, are topics of great discussion. Thankfully, traditional Indian golf has always conserved water and now is adopting recycled effluent for most irrigation systems. The environment has always been uppermost in the minds of Indian golfers, and developers of newer courses are taking heed of these matters from golf-course design teams.

Luckily, the development of new golf courses is taking time and not many new courses are being built in any one year—one, or two, at most—so control is still very tight and the result is good, responsible golf developments. This slower pace of development also means that many of the required maintenance personnel are sourced from within the current golf industry—except for during the mid-1990s, when four or five expatriates were employed as golf-course superintendents at the major aforementioned projects. These people provided a lot of excellent base training that is now being passed on.

Interest is now being shown in the development of residential-style golf courses, which are styled along country-club lines, rather than purely a traditional golfing atmos-

phere. It is hoped this will make golf more family friendly. Already, two residential golf-course developments in India have done well.

Many newcomers from business and middle-class backgrounds are now joining the traditional hard-core golfing fraternity. With an expanding audience, there are now two high-quality monthly golf magazines being sold around the country, and satellite TV has brought the major golf tournaments from around the world into the living rooms of

Indians across the country. Even though in a country of one billion people the golfing population is only around 60,000, the sport continues to attract a growing following. And with its vibrant golfing history, golf in India provides a rich and rewarding experience for any golfer.

New Delhi Golf Club, New Delhi, India. Wildlife abounds; a peacock has wandered into the bunker. (Photo by Phil Ryan.)

