



# Trees what trees?

Transforming an established 18-hole tree-lined course into a links set-up with lots

**F**rom the air you get a good view of the Nelson Golf Club fairways. But what you won't see as your plane descends to the airport that adjoins the golf club are many trees. Hundreds have fallen to the chainsaw in a bold move designed to return Nelson to the seaside links layout it was when it opened in 1905.

About 450 trees, mostly pine, but also gum and macrocarpa, have been felled in a near five year process. The transformation has been long and at times painful but the aim is to make the course a more challenging and interesting test of seaside golf in the best UK

traditions, and to enable Nelson to join the ranks of New Zealand seaside links golf courses capable of staging significant championships.

The job is almost complete, Nelson having morphed into one of the few genuine seaside links courses in the country, joining the likes of Paraparaumu Beach, Chisholm Park and Oreti Sands.

The club is confident its course will become a point of difference on a New Zealand golf scene dominated by parkland-style courses.

Nelson's club professional Glyn Delany says the course's reputation was that you could smack the ball just about anywhere and recover.

of bunkers and a minimum of trees is a monumental challenge

"Even with the trees, there was never any rough as such and you could hit any club out of the rough virtually anywhere on the course," he says. "It's a whole different game here now."

The chainsaw massacre has been accompanied by the replacement of almost every bunker on the course, the growing of more rough where the trees used to be, and the construction of mounds, waste areas and other features to define the fairways.

Cutting down the trees has opened up magnificent views over Tasman Bay from many parts of the course. It has also exposed

more of the natural humps and hollows of the fairways and, in the character of true seaside links, exposed the course to wind and weather. In Nelson's case, that's mostly sunshine, but without the interference of large trees, the sea breezes and occasional strong southerlies have more of a say in shot selection.

The process to transform a good course into a potentially great one hasn't been without controversy. The change has had the buy-in of the club's members. But not all of them.

Says Delany, "Some members are taking longer than others to



realise Nelson has become a thinking golfer's course. Every golfer now has to think about course management. You didn't have to worry too much previously. You could just whack your ball anywhere."

The course has gone from a white tee slope rating of 113 to 120, while the NZSCR is now 70.8, or 72.4 off the blue tees.

Chairman Kevin Armstrong headed a committee that drove the process, with input from club members, male and female, and club professionals Ken Allan (who held that position from 1989 to 2011) and his successor, Delany.

The Transform Nelson movement had some strong advocates, including Sir Bob Charles. When competing in a ProAm event at Nelson five years ago, Sir Bob remarked that the course would be great without all its trees. Armstrong says his opinion helped tip the balance of opinion.

Course architect Jeff Asche was commissioned to prepare a master plan.

The transformation coincided with the arrival of course superintendent Brendan O'Hara, who had previously operated at the Poverty Bay and Manawatu courses, and secretary-manager Peter Hay.

O'Hara says that, aesthetics aside, it was accepted that the trees were a hazard. They had to be pruned every two years to comply with civil aviation requirements and some of the old pines were just plain dangerous, with one falling branch narrowly missing a woman golfer. Also, the pine trees sucked up a lot of precious water.

Armstrong says the master plan was always seen as a living document that could accommodate unforeseen eventualities like

the weather rather than being a rigid plan, and that's the way it has worked out.

"Making the changes has required patience by members. We've aimed to maintain the course to a high standard of playability throughout the redevelopment and we've achieved this thanks to Brendon and his team."

If a substantial number of trees are removed from a course, as has happened at Nelson, it's essential to compensate in other areas, for aesthetic reasons obviously but also to prevent the course becoming a smorgasbord for birdies and pars.

At Nelson, trees have given way to new and renovated bunkers, with many of the existing bunkers considered of little strategic consequence.

By June 2013 almost every bunker on the course will have been upgraded or replaced with revetted sod-faced bunkers, some of them pot bunkers in the best Scottish tradition. New fairway mounding has also been created.

This hasn't been a money-no-object makeover. Armstrong says the transformation has been undertaken on a "very skinny" budget. Nearly all of the labour has been supplied by O'Hara and his team, with the creation of the revetted bunkers (with great lumps of turf) a test of bodily stamina.

O'Hara says the greatest challenge was to cause as little disruption to club members as possible. "In a perfect world, you'd close down the course for six months, bring in the bulldozers and diggers and complete the project. But that would have cost big dollars; instead, we've done virtually everything ourselves."



## The job is almost complete, Nelson having morphed into one of the few genuine seaside links courses in the country

### GREENACRES GOLF CLUB

Greenacres is another popular course in the Nelson region, situated on Best Island in Tasman Bay. It is a relatively flat peninsula course with trees and water hazards and some fabulous sea views. It is long off the blue tees (6202m) but one of the trickiest holes is its shortest par-4, at 302m. It demands careful placement off the tee with its sharp dogleg left and you must be spot-on with your approach to a sloping plateau green. Be short or off line and your ball can roll right off the front of the green.

**ADDRESS** Best Island Rd, Richmond  
**PAR** 71 (5971m)  
**GREEN FEES** \$32 (aff), \$43 (non aff)  
**PHONE** 03 544 6441 (pro shop)  
**WEBSITE** www.greenacresgolfclub.co.nz  
**EMAIL** greenacres@golf.co.nz

### MOTUEKA GOLF CLUB

Motueka offers a true parklands challenge with attractive, narrow, tree-lined fairways. Several holes have views to Tasman Bay. Although the course is relatively short at 5798m (white tees) and 5965m (blue), you must drive straight or suffer the chip-out consequences. The No 1 stroke hole, the 400m 12th, is the ultimate example, with out of bounds to the right and trees down both sides. If you drive it left to stay away from the OOB fence, you block out a straight shot to the two-tiered green. Even low handicappers will settle for par here.

**ADDRESS** Harbour Rd, Motueka  
**PAR** 72 (5798m)  
**GREEN FEES** \$25 (aff), \$30 (non aff)  
**PHONE** 03 528 8998  
**WEBSITE** www.motuekagolf.co.nz  
**EMAIL** enquiries@motuekagolf.co.nz

With the absence of trees has come a change in the philosophy regarding rough. It is now more clearly defined, with a first and second cut having been established.

"Rough had to take the place of the trees to give the course greater definition," says club pro Delany. "My opinion is if you've put your ball in the second cut, you've hit a poor shot."

Delany says although members complained for a while, most now think the course is great, as do visitors. "They like it because it's a different golf course to others they've played in New Zealand. There are not many true seaside links courses here."

Delany rates Paraparaumu Beach and Chisholm Park as his two top seaside links, but he believes Nelson possesses some of the best golf holes in the country. The club's signature hole is the sixth, which he believes may be New Zealand's best par-3.

The seaside hole adjoins Tasman Bay, which has swallowed many a sliced tee shot while out-of-bounds pegs down the right making for a daunting tee shot, especially in strong winds. Depending on wind and tee position, you can hit anything from a sand wedge to a driver on this hole.

With bunkers to the left, the skinny green looks even narrower from the tee. The green drops away at the front and right side and even a slightly miscalculated putt can easily roll off the green.

No 14 is another Delany favourite. Again hugging the beach line, it's an extremely demanding, long par-4 (at 400m).

With the major rebuilding job due for completion by June 2013, ground staff will have 60 to 80 hours a week free for other jobs. O'Hara says work will begin in earnest on improving fairways, greens, tee boxes and drainage... refinements that will convert Nelson into an even better course.

Members know how much the course has changed, but the first big test for outsiders will come in 2014 when the Nelson Golf Club hosts the New Zealand Amateur Championship. ●

### NELSON GOLF CLUB

**ADDRESS** Bolt Rd, Tahunanui, Nelson  
**PAR** 71 (5908m)  
**GREEN FEES** \$38 (aff), \$48 (non aff)  
**PHONE** 03 548 5029  
**WEBSITE** www.nelsongolf.co.nz  
**EMAIL** nelson@golf.co.nz