



## CLUB OF THE MONTH >

# Royal Park Golf Course

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**W**E could tell you a lot about Royal Park golf course and its rich history.

That the nine-hole layout, just over two kilometres north Melbourne's CBD, is unique in that it has active tram and train lines running through it.

That it is spread across three paddocks alongside the Melbourne Zoo and that it is not uncommon to hear the roar of a lion or the trumpet of an elephant as you meander around this charming setting.

Not forgetting, either, the five-time Open champion, the late Peter Thomson (AO, CBE), learnt to play golf here as a teenager.

He only wandered onto Royal Park public golf course near his home by chance. His uncle had taken him there accompanied by his trusty greyhound.

Thomson used to say, "I looked around and saw a few golfers on the course and thought I would come back soon and give golf a go."

Give it a go he did, winning the club championship in 1945 as a 16-year-old. Three years later Thomson was the Victorian Amateur champion. Eventually, of course, he carved out a marvellous career with victories in five Open Championships and numerous other wins in Australia and overseas.

'Thommo' was not the only champion golfer to cut his teeth as a beginner at Royal Park.

Gus Jackson and Mick Ryan immediately come to mind as well.

Jackson won the Victorian Amateur Championship in 1926 and 1933 along with many other titles. Ryan won the Vic amateur crown in



1930 and 1932 and the Australian Amateur in 1929. He also won the Australian Open in 1932 and many more events.

Founded in 1903, the clubhouse, Royal Park is Crown Land, which was permanently reserved as a Public Park in 1876. It is currently 170 hectares in size, making it the largest park in the City of Melbourne. It has been managed by the City of Melbourne since the reservation, first as trustees and since 1931 as Committee of Management. The golf course was built in 1903 when the club were given a lease.

Maintained and managed by the club members until 1960 when the clubhouse was partially destroyed by fire. The club remained using what was left of the clubhouse until 1970, where after talks with the Keilor golf club merged to create the Tullamarine country club at Keilor.

The council took over the running of the course from March 1971 and the clubhouse was rebuilt.

In the mid-1980s Thomson's firm of golf course architects was hired to improve the course layout.

The club celebrated its 100th year in 2003 with a Centenary Weekend of Golf Tournament, with Thomson again returning to the club to present prizes to winners. Thomson also wrote the foreword to the book on the club's history, written by club member Denise Hinton. A plaque sits on the first tee honouring Thomson's legacy to Royal Park.

All this is a roundabout way of letting you know that Royal Park has undergone a renaissance and to tell you that its rich history and recent rebirth demand a round of golf or at least a visit.

Driving the change is GreenSpace Management, a golf management company established to 'better' public access golf facilities in Australia.

Many within the golf industry know the man behind GreenSpace, Peter Vlahandreas, who, at 38, is already a 20-year veteran at the elite end of golf club management. He has undergone an 'epiphany' of sorts and turned his attention to public access golf courses.

Royal Park is the second golf course management project Vlahandreas' company has undertaken.

The City of Melbourne and the YMCA Victoria are partners in the project.

Royal Park now falls under the Active Melbourne umbrella with eight other sport and recreation facilities across the City of Melbourne operated by the YMCA Victoria.

"We are truly humbled to be working with the YMCA Victoria and the City of Melbourne at one of the country's most important public access golf courses," says Vlahandreas.

The change has been about setting up really important foundations for golf, but more importantly sowing the seeds for broader community access to the facility. That is golfers and non-golfers.

"Now, in the sport of golf, we are really starting to delve into the fun stuff, like bringing your dog to golf. 'BYO dog' we're calling it," Vlahandreas says.

"We're also bringing back Random Golf Club at Royal Park; now that's going to be very cool indeed."

As well, Royal Park has opened up to non-golfers with fitness and exercise classes and become a welcoming space where community members can come together. You don't have to be a golfer to be welcome.

"The traditional sense of the game of golf has its place. And we are strong believers in that as custodians of the game," Vlahandreas says.

"But in public access golf, I don't believe the traditions need to hold us back. We should always be polite towards the traditions of the game.

"But the younger generation - the 20, 30 or 40 something - should always be made to feel welcome. People have become fed up with all the rules around the game and its facilities," he adds.

"The biggest single entry point as to how people get into the game is through public access facilities. They have to start somewhere.



“And by chopping down all those barriers, removing things like dress code and adding value doing things that are fun and that resonate with the community; you then start to create a community hub where everyone feels welcome.

“You start to create a community amenity as opposed to a golf course. And there is a real difference and that difference is of tangible community benefit.

“It’s about working in alignment with like-minded partners – in this case the City of Melbourne and the YMCA Victoria. That is the only way it works. And it’s the future of public access golf in this country.

“It’s not rocket science,” says Vlahandreas.

“For me it’s about partnering with people with a shared vision and doing this for the right reasons. It’s not about the quick buck. I want to grow old in these facilities. I’m 38 now and I want to be doing this when I’m 68.”

“At Royal Park, it’s about making Melbourne more active and bringing together all the community amenities that are aligned to recreation health and wellbeing and everything in between.



“And golf has finally become part of that community fold. It’s not only about doing great golf at Royal Park; but that’s certainly on the agenda anyway.”

Vlahandreas is pleased he is in a space where he can be innovative and not just deal with the ‘mono-customer’ that is the golfer.

“I’m dealing with the community and the public,” he said. “We keep things simple and focus on the customer experience. This simple approach, along with a raft of high-tech cloud-based systems behind the scenes, allows us to

deliver a great experience for public access golfers and facility users.

“These facilities are incredible spaces to deliver great service as well as an opportunity to really make a difference.

“I’m not interested in a ‘just the lights on’ approach. I want to work with partners who are fully committed to making their operation vibrant for 365 days of the year. They have to come with us on the journey.”

Regency Park Community Golf Course, in Adelaide, has already reaped handsome rewards

from GreenSpace in partnership with the City of Port Adelaide Enfield.

“It was very similar to Royal Park said Vlahandreas. “Now it is reborn. That’s what we’re about.”

Regency Park rounds almost doubled in the first 12 months of GreenSpace’s involvement. In just over two years, this little public access golf facility just north of Adelaide’s CBD now welcomes a diverse mix of users – more than 35 per cent of them women and girls – with many setting foot on a golf facility for the first time.

Vlahandreas adds proudly: “Regency Park is one of the most utilised public access golf facilities in the country and a blueprint for others to follow.

“We have created a canvas to be better in the public access golf space. It’s an ability to drive change through a simple customer-centric approach, innovation and partnering with like-minded organisations and councils. It’s an exciting journey we’re on and we’re just getting started.”

*Inside Golf prepared this article on Royal Park Golf Course for GreenSpace Management. ©*

