

# A COURSE REVIVED

BY DARIUS OLIVER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY LISBON

THE LAKES GOLF CLUB MADE SEVERAL TOUGH DECISIONS ABOUT ITS COURSE AND ITS FUTURE. THE LAYOUT STILL BEARS SOME RESEMBLANCE TO ITS FORMER SELF, BUT PLAYERS THIS YEAR WILL NOTICE SIGNIFICANT CHANGES SINCE THE 1992 AUSTRALIAN OPEN.

The Lakes Golf Club has hosted countless prominent championships in its history, including three previous Australian Opens, but none have been played on a golf course quite like this one.

When the founding members of The Lakes established the club in 1928, it was on the scrubby, sandy dunes near the suburb of Kingsford, and a piece of land famously set within Botany Water Reserve. The large lake that dominates the back nine there was part of the original layout designed by Eric Apperly and Tom Howard. Little of their course survived the 1960s, however, when the construction of Southern Cross Drive split the property in two and forced a complete redesign by American architect Robert von Hagge. Von Hagge's course opened in 1970 and was well received, despite being completely different in nature to the earlier version. It successfully hosted the Australian Open in 1980 and again in 1992. Following the '92 Open, won by Steve Elkington, the golf course curiously lost its way, quickly deteriorating as a combination of architectural neglect and internal mismanagement started to take its toll.

The Australian Open returns for the first time in almost two decades to The Lakes Golf Club near Sydney's airport.



The huge lake is now much more in play at the par-5 14th.

The pivotal moment in the rebirth of The Lakes came in early 2007, when a report tabled to the board showed that all 18 greens on the course were struggling with root growth and would die out if prompt action wasn't taken. They were also told that the club's ageing irrigation system was in desperate need of replacement. For a board already burdened with a multi-million-dollar debt, thanks to a new clubhouse, the news couldn't have been worse.

From crisis often comes opportunity, and in truth The Lakes of 2007 was a complete mess, and the board of the day knew it. Over-treed, unattractive, inconsistent and with an uneasy mix of design styles and grasses, the layout

had been slipping for years and the overwhelming view of the board was that rather than continuing to patch over problem spots, they should instead look at completely overhauling the golf course.

Enter Mike Clayton and his team, who were recommended by a number of previous clients and engaged almost immediately to prepare a plan to move the club forward. Clayton's plan was somewhat radical, and involved returning the course to its sandy roots by widening playing corridors, removing intrusive trees and introducing expansive waste areas.

"The Lakes didn't really give us a brief," Clayton says. "We had a vision

for the course and they accepted it and liked the concept of taking the front nine, especially, back to where it was by taking out the trees and building the sandy waste lands." The aim of Clayton's crew was clearly to return to the linksy look and feel of golf in this part of Sydney during the 1920s and '30s. Basically, they wanted to get The Lakes looking like The Lakes should always have looked.

### Alpha and Omega

In August 2007 Clayton and his design team started work on the first and 18th holes, bookends that were as much about them getting a feel for the land as the board and members getting prepared for what might lay ahead.

Shortly after this work was finished they started on the rest of the property, redesigning all 18 holes and every single green site and bunker on the golf course. The work was completed and ready for play in August last year.

While most of the von Hagge routing remains, gone are the non-native trees, choking fairways and small pot bunkers, and in their place are large areas of exposed sand, broad strategic fairways that challenge golfers to nestle in close to dangerous corners, and wildly exaggerated putting contours that enhance the tactical appeal of the holes and reinforce the linksy feel. Although the championship was clearly on the radar, it wasn't a matter of making this an Australian Open-ready layout but rather introducing strategy back into a golf course that had moved almost completely down the penal path. It was about building something that might endure and fascinate members and visitors for years to come. As Clayton himself noted of the work done: "Nothing we did here was influenced by the Open, except that we were trying

to ask demanding strategic questions, but we tried to do that with width and not with rough which is the way of modern American and European tour golf."

Despite being wider, more forgiving and slightly shorter than the previous course, the new Lakes is far from a pushover and won't be any easier to score on, thanks to its heavily contoured targets, stern hazards and the shortening of the second from a soft par 5 into a fierce par 4. In terms of how it will play compared to the last time the Australian Open was held here, Clayton opines that, "It will be different from 1992 because there is more room from the tee and there is more contour on the greens. That will make for the biggest difference because the players will have to think more about where they place their ball on the fairway." Previously the middle of the fairway was generally the best place to drive your ball, but that's no longer the case as there are a number of holes where central drives will lead to more complicated approaches.

There are also several greens on the new layout where pin placements and the strength and direction of the wind can affect strategy both from the tee and with second shots, the best examples being the highly contentious 13th and 14th holes. The 13th is a driveable short par-4 that will make a fool of anyone shooting for an eagle but who fails by leaving their ball to the side of its skinny, pushed-up green. As is the case any time a short hole causes carnage, there are sure to be complaints about this target from some in the field. What the naysayers miss, of course, is that the 13th is actually a very simple hole to par if you play conservatively from the tee.

The next hole is another real talking point. One of the club's iconic back-nine par 5s, the 14th follows and then crosses the main lake to an enormous green now collapsing violently down a steep incline towards the water. What's exceptionally cool about the 14th green is that it has singlehandedly transformed and improved a hole that for years had an over-inflated reputation. Before, if you couldn't hit this green in two you could lay up anywhere near the edge of the hazard and have a comfortable angle across the water for your third shot. What's changed now is that golfers of all abilities have to plot their path to the green. If you can't reach in two you'll need to lay up, but where to do so depends entirely on the location of the flag. Similarly, the days of big hitters shooting blindly over the water and hoping for a simple two-putt birdie are gone. At times, putting for your third will be the best option, but at other stages you'll really need to leave yourself a full approach shot in order to have any chance of getting close to the pin.

While a number of players are bound to dislike the severity of the 13th and 14th greens, others will surely embrace the fun and challenge involved in negotiating such taxing and original targets. There are other striking transformations to look out for as well, particularly early in the round. The entire front nine now has an open, sandy appearance, with holes dominated by large, grand-scale fairways and rugged blowout-style bunkering. Individually, holes like the second, third and seventh are from the top shelf, while the famous opening hole is a much

more strategic test now that its tee has been returned to the edge of the lake and players are forced to carry at least part of the water hazard. The sixth is another wonderfully strategic par 4. Measuring a touch longer than 310 metres, the hole heads uphill and bends slightly left around a cluster of dangerous bunkers that golfers will need to flirt with in order to set up a relatively straightforward approach. Those bailing right here face a nasty pitch for their second.

On the back nine, key holes that remain similar to earlier tournaments include the excruciatingly narrow par-4 10th and the spectacular par-5 11th, a genuine three-shotter that doglegs right around the lake towards a peninsular green. The left-bending 17th is another famous par 5, and significantly improved thanks to Clayton's changes which advantage those who can drive their ball closest to the lake from the tee, rather than rewarding players who bail away from the water. The par-3 closing hole is also a considerable improvement on the previous incarnation.

The only real knocks on The Lakes now remain the fact that both nines close with a short hole, which some view as a negative, and the broad-leafed kikuyu grass on its fairways. The kikuyu stays

green year-round and works to control the distances golf balls run, but the grass is far from an ideal surface upon which to play the sort of chasing, bouncing approach shots that the design dictates. During the Australian Open the turf is sure to be kept tight and bouncy, but a lingering concern remains how these surfaces will play for the members once the club has moved out of tournament-preparation mode. If they are unable to keep the grass lean and keen all year, then the pitch-and-spin shots will tend to overrule those of the bounce-and-chase variety, which would be unfortunate.

These small concerns aside, The Lakes golf course is once again one of the shining lights in Sydney and its redesign should be viewed as an overwhelming success, regardless of what happens during Open week. Clayton and his crew did a superb job returning the layout to its sandy Sydney roots, but the board at the time also deserves a great deal of credit for not getting in their way, and for having the courage and foresight to look past adversity and instead see opportunity. While it's unlikely to win universal approval from Australian Open participants, importantly for the membership this is now a constantly stimulating, strategic test that asks a

hell of a lot more questions than simply hitting fairways and greens. It's difficult to imagine many of them finding it less enjoyable than the previous course.

Among the favourites for the Stonehaven Cup this year will be defending champion Adam Scott, American legend Fred Couples, two-time winner Robert Allenby (if he plays), young guns Michael Sim and Marc Leishman and former US Open champion Geoff Ogilvy, whose views on the course will be interesting given he has recently entered into a design partnership with Clayton. Ogilvy had nothing to do with the redesign here, and if he wins the event it will have less to do with any insider knowledge he might have gleaned from his new associate, and more due to his willingness to accept quirks and adapt to the challenges this type of golf course regularly throws at you.

Of course, the big winner this year may well be Golf Australia, which is locked into hosting its flagship event in Sydney until at least 2012, and might have found the ideal complement to the more conventional golf on offer at Royal Sydney and The Australian. The Lakes isn't nearly as dramatic as last year's venue New South Wales Golf Club, but it's a fresh and unflinching test and is certainly more convenient and accessible. □

Changes to the playing lines means golfers hoping to reach the 17th green in two will have to challenge the water more closely.



# 6 HOLES TO WATCH

The man responsible for the dramatic redesign of The Lakes chooses six holes where players and galleries can expect fireworks. BY MIKE CLAYTON.

The Lakes' toughest hole, the par-4 third, can stretch to almost 450 metres from the tees.

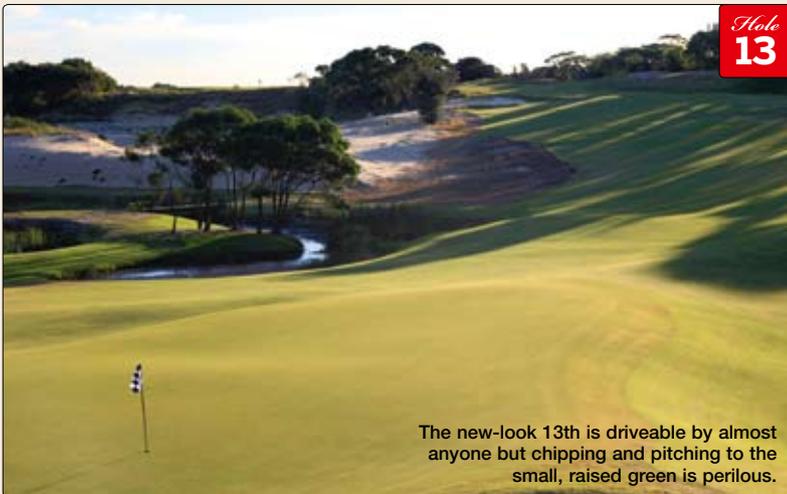


Hole 3

Several tees mean the short seventh can range from a pitch to a full-blooded mid-iron up the hill.



Hole 7



Hole 13

The new-look 13th is driveable by almost anyone but chipping and pitching to the small, raised green is perilous.

## 1st hole – par 4, 365 metres

Players are confronted with a decision on the opening hole with a tee shot across the lake running down the left side of the fairway. The edge of the water is on a diagonal from the tee and the choice concerns how much of the water to cross. The longer the carry the shorter the approach, but it is a dangerous shot to take on at the first hole.

## 3rd hole – par 4, 444 metres

The third is the longest and most difficult of the par 4s. The original green was built for the par 5 this hole used to be, but the new green is bigger and easier to hit with a long iron. The second hole is not the easiest par 4 either, making the start one of the more difficult in the country.

## 7th hole – par 3, 160 metres

This uphill par 3 is one where tournament organisers will be able to use some imagination to inject a little variety into the play. The green has a small back tier that's designed to be played to from a forward tee with a 9-iron or perhaps a wedge. From the back tee the shot is obviously longer but the pin placements are a little easier to access – with probably 6 and 7-irons depending on the wind.

## 13th hole – par 4, 288 metres

Tom Simpson, the great British designer, said every course should have a bad hole, so for those who don't like this short par 4 that will be my answer. I think it is a good hole; it's driveable, the fairway is wide but the green is better approached from a precise point and line. Any tee shot straying too far from that line makes the pitch to the high, narrow green very difficult. Once you are out of position here it is a struggle – as it should be on a hole so short.

## 14th hole – par 5, 476 metres

This is the most photographed of the club's holes because it is one of the very few in the country where there is a long approach all the way across water. The old green was small and difficult to hit, but we made the new green easily the biggest on the course and it now comes all the way down to the edge of the lake. The green is wildly undulating and three-putting will be common from long distances. Most players will be able to easily reach the hole in two, but it's dangerous and there will be an equal number of 3s and 7s carded here during the Australian Open.

## 17th hole – par 5, 454 metres

The green at this par 5 was changed to reward drives played to the far left edge of the fairway. The old green had been orientated to advantage the drive that was played farthest from the water on the left and that made absolutely no strategic sense. Hitting the green from the left now will take a brilliant shot, but players coming from the right side will have to do even more. Like the 14th, there will be chances for big swings in fortune and it is likely to be the hole to decide the championship.