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“The glorious Cape Kidnappers courtesy of David Cannon.”
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Wairoa Golf Club

Wairoa Golf Club is an 18 hole 5700 yard course and has 70 members who pay a $410 subscription - about £200. It’s a great little course, and right at the heart of the community with a mix of Maori and Pakeha (not of Maori decent) members.

A team of five members mow the course, and one has taken a New Zealand Sports Turf Institute (NZSTI) course to qualify for spraying and proficiency in basic course management. This mainly farming community are experts at handling machinery, and luckily the old Jim Arthur adage “ask a farmer what to do, then do the opposite” does not apply.

The club works closely with their NZSTI agronomist, who is aware of their limited financial resources and pitches his report accordingly. Watering and fertilising are kept to a minimum with the agronomist advising the common sense approach based on the colour of the green.

The greens are mown at 5mm and have some good areas of brown top bent, but also poa, couch, an indigenous variety of paspalum, and fescue.

Around twenty years ago the club planted copes of pinus radiata in strategic areas around the course but also as an investment for the future, the pines are now mature but also as an investment for the future, the pines are now mature and a local forester has valued the timber from the forests are used for paper is recycled into notepads and the ground cover. Even the waste cardboard is recycled into notepads and timber from the forests are used for firewood.

The club has also applied for funding for innovative conservation projects, with a view to enhancing existing wetland areas, ponds and streams and generally improving the whole habitat for native and endangered species – a really inspirational project.

Hopefully this can be achieved with the help of two local naturalists, and working with the local community and schools. Wairoa hopes to prove that golf courses are not just for playing golf but can play an important role in protecting and enhancing New Zealand’s native wildlife.

Another creative idea to generate extra income and encourage new members is a twilight nine-hole Texas Scramble, local companies are invited to enter teams of staff and customers. The evenings have become a great success, bringing in extra income, new members, and community involvement. One guest did turn up to play in wellingtons, shorts and a vest which even by Kiwi standards was a little too relaxed, but he was made welcome, and returned more appropriately dressed on the next occasion!

Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club

The next port of call was Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club. This is one of the greatest courses in the southern hemisphere - an unblatant links which has held 12 New Zealand Opens. The great Peter Thomson said about the course “I loved it instantly. We had nothing like it in Australia – a monument to the game and a gift to the future. And the winds will ever blow to test the golfers’ will and integrity.” The course was designed in 1949 by Alex Ross who worked with Alister MacKenzie.

The club with the support of the NZSTI is restoring the course to a true links. The greens are now about 50/50 browntop bent and poa annua, are cut in summer at 3.5mm and are very firm and quick, and the fairways - a mix of fescue/bent/poa – run fast. Paraparaumu is reducing its course overheads and is being managed environmentally responsibly. The turf was not a uniform green, but was the perfect surface on which to play golf.

Manawatu Golf Club

The following day I visited Manawatu Golf Club. The club claims the title of the country’s oldest golf course – it was founded in 1895 and boasts 1,300 members.

Over the years the tree-lined fairways had grown out of proportion to the site and many inappropriate species had been planted.

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The students have helped build nest boxes and plant native trees and shrubs. Around 70 rare Kākāpō have been introduced, and aviaries have been built to house the rare Takahe, a coot like bird, and the Kaka, a prehistoric like pigeon, to the winter dairy cattle graze the meadow roughs and over a three-month cycle remove the ground cover.

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Superintendents in New Zealand enjoy a good degree of autonomy in their role with operational decisions largely made by the superintendent in consultation with the chair of the green, referring to the club agronomist and golf course architect when necessary.

Green committees are normally only involved in setting goals and a long-term strategies to guide the course management team. The chair of the green is often a long-term position, the thinking being that if someone is knowledgeable and competent, why not retain them?

Golf clubs in New Zealand are finding it difficult to survive meaning superintendents and committees have to think outside the box. There are over 400 golf courses in the country, and some of the smallest clubs cannot even afford green staff, so members are pulling together to maintain the course.

Manawatu Golf Award.

Cape Kidnappers

Our final visit was to Cape Kidnappers - a Tom Doak design of nearly 7200 yards, a par 71 off the back tees, and one of the most spectacular golf courses in the world. This top end resort course is very conscious of best environmental practice and managing with less, and Course Manager Brad Sim recently won the GCBA’s International Environmental Leaders in Golf Award.

Cape Kidnappers preserves and enhances wildlife habitats, and a predator-proof fence around the 2500ha site - protected by two staff pest controllers - provides a safe habitat for native and endangered wildlife.

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The greens are mown at 5mm and have some good areas of brown top bent, but also poa, couch, an indigenous variety of paspalum, and fine fescue.

Around twenty years ago the club planted copious cups of pine radiata in strategic areas around the course but also as an investment for the future, the pines are now mature and a local forester has valued the trees at $35,000 (£26,000) if they are felled. The club plans to replant native trees if some can be found of a future marketable value, and this will continue the legacy for future generations.

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Manawatu Golf Club

The following day I visited Manawatu Golf Club. The club claims the title of the country’s oldest golf course - it was founded in 1895 and boasts 1,300 members. Over the years the tree-lined fairways had grown out of proportion to the site and many inappropriate species had been planted.

The advisers have developed a long-term plan for fitting a selection of trees to improve air and light circulation for the benefit of the turf. The course is a challenging layout with firm fast greens, which contrast in style with lush soft fairways and approaches, making for a target style of golf. A putting green has been developed with one half laser perfectly flat as requested by professional golfers. I then visited the nearby head-quarters of the NZSTI. Firstly we were shown a putting green used by staff. One side was USA spec the other local sand for a long-term comparison, and then to the research plots where herbicides, recycled glass construction and summer grass were being studied. This was mainly to help clubs be more environmentally responsible - and also save money.

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Golf – the most popular sport in New Zealand, with almost 20% of the population playing golf or attending a golf course at least once a year. The game has been played in New Zealand since the late 18th century, and today there are over 400 golf clubs across the country.

According to the New Zealand Golf Association, there are around 400,000 golfers in New Zealand, which translates to approximately 20% of the population. This number is expected to grow in the future as more people become interested in the sport.

The popularity of golf in New Zealand is due to a number of factors, including the country’s natural beauty, the mild climate, and the availability of high-quality courses. The country has a number of world-class golf courses that attract golfers from around the world, including the Manawatu Golf Club and Cape Kidnappers.

Golf courses are also an important part of the New Zealand economy, with the sport generating significant revenue through tourism, hospitality, and other related industries. In addition, golf courses provide a valuable environmental service by enhancing biodiversity and improving water quality.

By promoting sustainable practices and environmental stewardship, golf courses in New Zealand can continue to provide an enjoyable and healthy recreational experience for players while also contributing to the conservation of natural resources for future generations.