

Pleasure, Playability, Poignancy... and the Pandemic

BY KRISTINE KERR

Two newly completed holes formed part of the 'VISION 2022' project at Omaha Beach GC on New Zealand's North Island.

Originally a nine-hole links-style resort course, the Omaha Beach golf course was built by locals in 1975 on the Whangateau Harbour side. In the early 2000s the extension of the course to 18 holes came about in conjunction with adjacent residential development on its south side.

OBGC has always been a popular course with members and visitors alike, despite a disparity in quality and style between the old North and new South nines. The original nine (North) holes were laid out on flat, low-lying land adjacent to the harbour, with a high water table and sandy, but somewhat silty, soils. Over time, natural drainage deteriorated, leading to worsening quality of the greens as well as areas of water pooling in low-lying parts of the course. In the intervening 30 years up to construction of the new nine (South), with an international boom in modern golf course design, and greater knowledge of specialist golf construction, the new holes presented a greater degree of shaping and rolling topography, reflective of the adjacent sand dunes; also drainage was able to be better dealt with.

One can only concur with the Omaha Beach Golf Club committee's phrasing of "idyllic coastal playground", used to describe the locale of Omaha Beach, an hour north of Auckland on New Zealand's North Island. Translated from New Zealand Maori, Omaha means a "place of pleasure". I think we're all in agreement!

A peninsula running north to south, Omaha is a sandspit formed some 5,000-6,000 years ago. Omaha Bay on its easterly side proffers a long, white-quartz sandy beach with a surf break, while on the western side is the calm Whangateau Harbour.

The development of Omaha Beach as a holiday resort began in the late 1960s, with a causeway and bridge built for access to the spit. Over the years Omaha has grown from a holiday resort to a small community with permanent residents.

GROW-IN: The par-3 15th hole, with tees nestled into wetland, playing adjacent to the harbour over a tidal inlet towards a long, narrow green.

RIGHT: Kristine with OB GC Superintendent Corey Willcox during construction.





ABOVE: Hole 15 lined with existing Pohutukawa trees; note more open approach from forward tees. BELOW: Aerial view of the now more-elevated Hole 15, with new bunkers set into a ridge on Hole 14.



In 2017, Kura Design was commissioned to create a masterplan for the remodelling of the 'North' nine. In conjunction with the Club, we determined goals including:

- Creating a sense of place, enhancing the theme of the coastal location, opening views to the harbour;
- Creating a style harmonious with the 'South' nine, including introduction of longer fescues;
- Integrating wetlands, boardwalks and native planting as in the 'South' nine;
- Improving playability and interest with the introduction of strategy, variety and shaping;
- Efficient drainage and increase in water storage;
- Increased size of tees (for maintainability); and
- Inclusion of bunkers and waste bunkers.

The renovation has been taking place in stages, with the first major works completed being the par-3 15th and 17th holes, along with minor lake edge extensions.

Hole 15 – 'Whangateau'
Par-3
 Blue: 179m | White: 140m – 160m | Red: 135m

Hole 15 is a new highlight at the entry to Omaha, being the first sight of land from the causeway crossing. The hole runs parallel to the Pohutukawa-tree-lined harbour and countenances a small area of wetland to carry from the tee towards a 40-metre-long, narrow green. The green 'bananas' slightly to the left and the elevated tees are angled such that from the forward tee is the longest direct line for the length of the green. From the rear tee the target width of green to land on is narrower, requiring greater surety – or luck – for the best chance of birdie.

The lower left side features two low-cut grassy 'catcher's mitts', the last line of protection before the wetland and tidal hazard further left.

With the prevailing south-westerly, slightly cross wind, a ball hit high runs the risk of unwittingly being blown off course towards the two righthand greenside bunkers. (The bunkers also serve a purpose of enhancing safety for players on the 14th fairway.)

For the less bold and perhaps canner golfer, there is the opportunity to keep the ball low and run it up to the green, being hazard-free in front, though sloping right to left towards the wetland.

As a previously low-lying hole with a high water table, the golf features have been constructed to a higher elevation. Additional clean sand stockpiled from earlier work at the club was available for fill, supplemented by carving out wetland, the latter incorporated to create

a harmonious theme with the 'South' nine, enhanced with native planting and boardwalk crossings. The low wetlands aid water collection and provide physical separation between holes, and impact strategy for both hole 14 and 15.

Hole 14
Par-4
 Blue: 416m | White: 370m | Red: 314m

The Hole 15 project included some remodelling of adjacent hole 14, as described on the website: "... the longest par-4 on the course playing all of its

length, plus some. Often the prevailing wind will dictate a long second shot to a sweeping double tier green. A water



NEW: Wetland and boardwalk hole 14 to 15.

hazard guards the length of the fairway on the left with water and bunkers short left of the green".

The design entailed new tees, minor re-shaping of the fairway, with the addition of two bunkers at the turning point set into a newly created ridge on the right-hand side of the hole. Playing close to the bunkers provides the most straightforward approach to the green. Errant shots nearer the green have been known to land in the new wetland created between 14 and 15.

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ABOVE: Hole 17 Ki te wai – “to the water” – playing towards the harbour, often into the prevailing south westerly wind and accordingly to the largest green on the course. Note the hole has multiple tees nestled into the wetland.
BELOW: Magical location on the sandspit, from the harbour across to the town and Omaha Beach. New Hole 18 tees align with the harbour edge.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The sandspit to the northeast – Hole 18 tees and Hole 17 green. The 18th fairway and green are next in line for remodelling.



HOLE 17 – ‘Ki te wai’
 (“To the water”)

Par-3
 Blue: 184m | White: 130m – 160m
 | Red: 105m

Hole 17 was remodelled in its entirety. As the penultimate hole, with the beautiful backdrop of the harbour, the sight of the large green encourages golfers to catch their breath before the 18th.

Play from multiple tees nestled into new wetlands will be impacted frequently by the prevailing south-westerly wind. The undulating green at 800m2 is the largest on the course. The concept is to provide golfers with the potential satisfaction of reaching the target in one; however landing on the wrong part of the green may leave a long putt... or two. The green is framed by humps and hollows, and large waste bunkers, including one over the back of the green, will be formed over time with usage.

An irrigation lake was enlarged for water storage and drainage, with a small impact on strategy. It is mostly in play from the rear tee. The location and extent of the increase was limited by the proximity to salt water, to prevent the encroachment of salt water into irrigation water.

Work commenced on the hole in August 2021, and both the hole and the renovated 18th tees were completed by Christmas 2021 – despite COVID and very wet and windy Spring weather.

During the design and construction phases, New Zealand (including the Auckland region where Omaha is located) was in a series of COVID-related lockdowns and I was unable to travel to the course. The resulting hole was a greater collaboration than usual, and with knowledgeable input from the superintendent, construction team and club members, I consider it a successful one.

Hole 17 ‘opened’ in late March. With the honour of the first tee shot on the hole, the day presented a howling south-westerly wind and I borrowed a steel-shafted 6-iron for a 105-metre shot! The ball landed resoundingly in the middle of the green, followed by several other ladies’ shots. (The men’s shots that day, from further back, were typically not as successful.)

Design commences soon on hole 18.



TEAMWORK

To expand on the note of collaboration, the team I worked with consisted of a Course Development Subcommittee drawn from both the Golf Club committee and the Friends of Omaha Trust (FOOT). This included course superintendent Corey Willcox who has been at the OBGC

for 16 years (and was at one time the youngest ever golfer to play in the NZ Open at 15); Tony Kortegast who is the President of the Friends of Omaha trust and responsible for tireless fundraising for the remodelling works and for the managing project implementation and finance on behalf of the Club; the Club

patron Steve Marshall; and Geoff Smith from the OBGC committee who assisted Tony in ‘herding the cats’, being the design and construction teams. Also closely involved were the Club President Kevin Weston, other committee members, and Richard Brabant (of FOOT) who amongst other things, arranged and managed the planting of the extensive new wetland areas, and main contractor Adam Jones of GRASS.

POIGNANCY

As well as the privilege of designing for OBGC, I am very grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to get to know my second cousin, Judy Crooks, who from an intellectual and sporting family, was in her 80s super sharp, energetic(!), witty and great fun. Judy still golfed and was a tremendous long-time supporter of the community as well as the golf club. I stayed with her during my site visits to the course and had a special sense of connection: my great uncle (Judy’s father) had built the stone wall for the entry to Omaha years ago too.

THE PANDEMIC

The first ‘ace’ at the 17th occurred just one week after its opening, achieved by Mark Bower (NZ being a small place he happens to be a friend of one of the family). The date was 1st April – April Fool’s Day – and Mark was playing with his oldest friend from childhood, making the occasion more special. The pin was in the front left portion of the green, 128 metres from the tee; Mark’s tee shot landed on the front edge and tracked to the cup and in. (Anecdotally, golf membership uptake has been on the rise in NZ since the COVID pandemic. Mark and his wife, Debra, long-time holiday makers at Omaha, are such an example, having taken up golf and joined OBGC during NZ’s lockdowns.

GRASSES

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