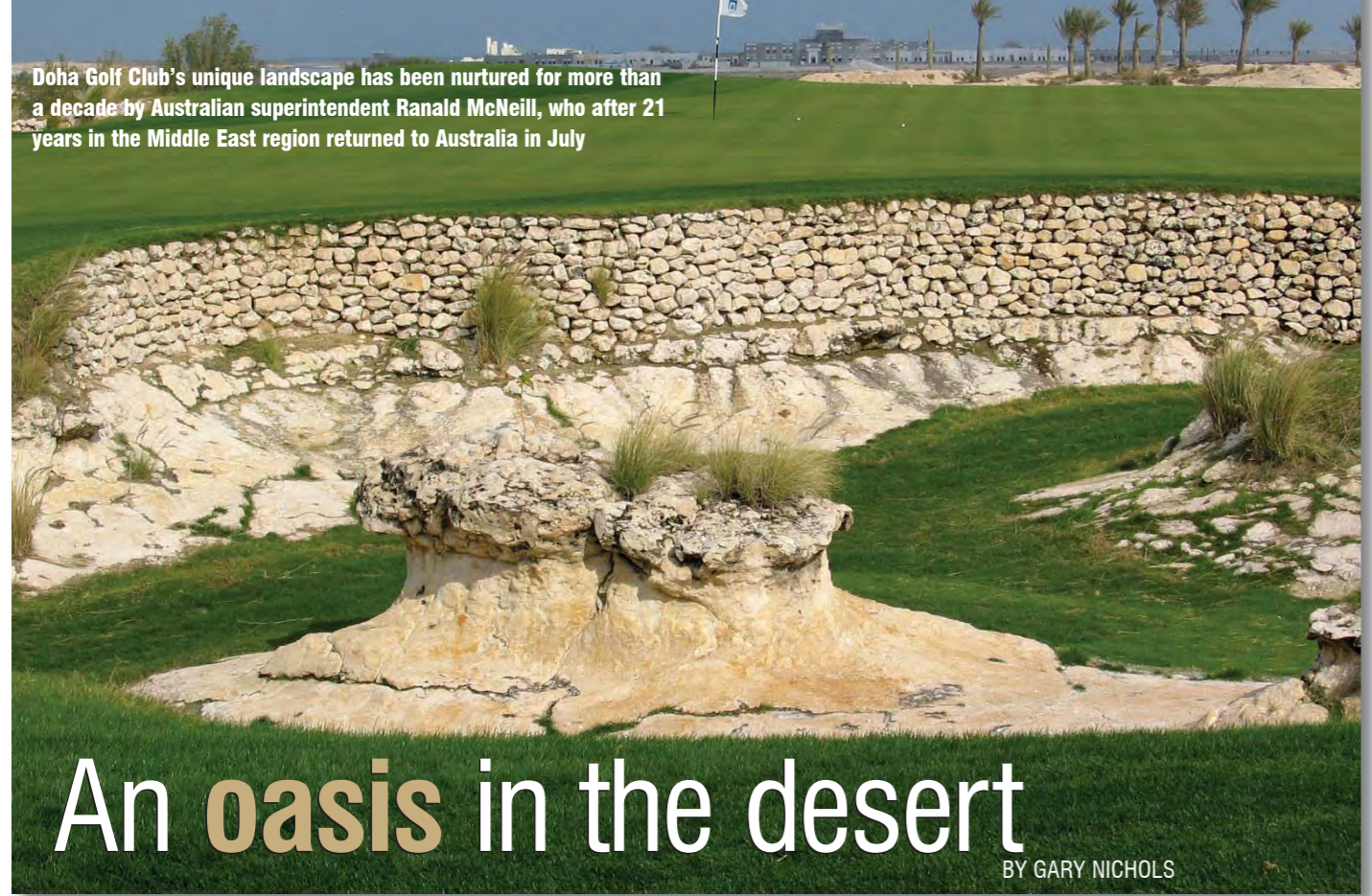


Doha Golf Club's unique landscape has been nurtured for more than a decade by Australian superintendent Ranald McNeill, who after 21 years in the Middle East region returned to Australia in July



An oasis in the desert

BY GARY NICHOLS

After 21 years plying his trade as a golf course superintendent in the Middle East, Ranald McNeill said goodbye to Doha Golf Club in July to resettle in Australia and begin a new chapter in his turf management career. Close friend Gary Nichols sits down with the former Moree lad to reflect on what has been a unique and ultimately rewarding overseas journey.



McNeill (left) was on hand to witness Adam Scott's dramatic final round 61 to win the 2008 Qatar Masters

It's just clicked over to noon, the temperature has climbed to 45°C and for Ranald McNeill it signals the end of another day ensuring the greens and fairways at Doha Golf Club have been manicured to perfection.

With the heat and humidity reaching near unbearable levels, work at the Qatar-based golf club begins nice and early for McNeill and his crew of up to 50. The maintenance shed doors are open by 4.30am and come midday it's knock-off time. By then it's time to head somewhere where the air conditioning is cranked up to max, or if you're brave enough, tackle the afternoon heat and smash a golf ball around for a few hours.

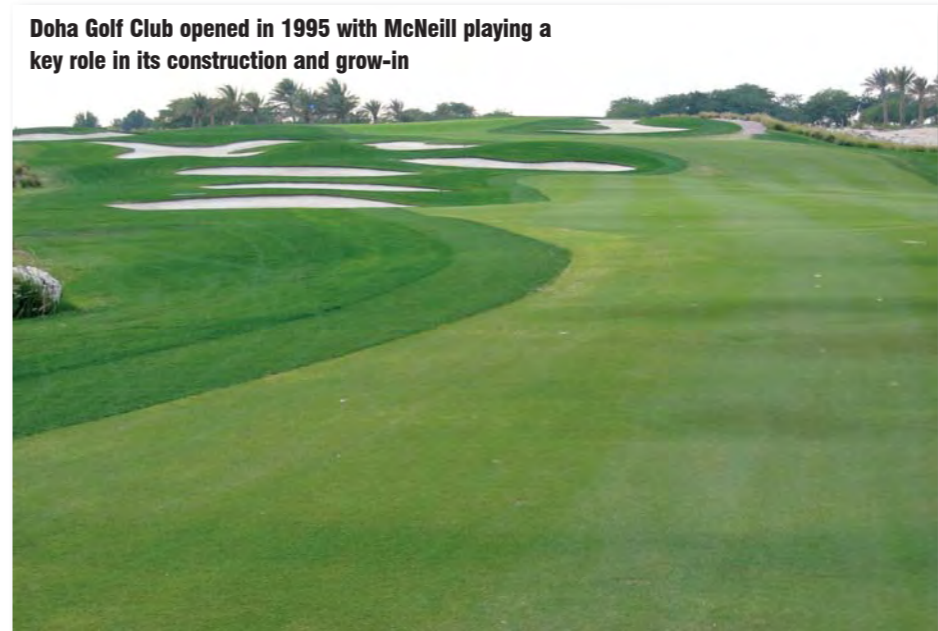
For the past 21 years the unique landscape and culture of the Middle East has been home to this particular Australian greenkeeper, seemingly a world away from his formative years in the industry which were spent as an apprentice at Moree Golf Club in northern NSW.

It was the love of the outdoors which prompted McNeill to get into the industry, but he could never have predicted that nearly three decades later he would be reflecting on a career which to this juncture has taken him all over the world.

THE ROAD TO THE MIDDLE EAST

After gaining his golf course management and greenkeeping ticket, McNeill made the move to Sydney to further his career. Short

Doha Golf Club opened in 1995 with McNeill playing a key role in its construction and grow-in



stints at the prestigious Lakes and Ryde-Parramatta golf clubs gave him the confidence and experience to apply for a job abroad, which would ultimately take him and his wife Beth on a wonderful and rewarding journey.

It all started in 1987 when a job vacancy appeared in The Sydney Morning Herald for an assistant golf course manager at the Emirates Golf Club in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"Beth must have put together an impressive CV as I was informed a few weeks later of my appointment," jokes McNeill. "We rushed down to the local library to find out all we could about our future home and were taken aback by pictures depicting mud buildings aligned next to a dirty creek."

After many sleepless nights and plenty of agonising, they finally made the decision to pack up their belongings and head for the oil-rich sand dunes of the Middle East.

When McNeill arrived at the Emirates Golf Club, the course was 70 per cent completed. To his astonishment, over 80 hectares of undulating sand dunes were being transformed

into a golfing oasis. After careful planning and two years of dedication, Dubai finally had its desert miracle.

The Emirates Golf Club, with its eye-catching signature Bedouin-style clubhouse inspires awe among those who play the course and today it plays host to the PGA-sanctioned Dubai Desert Classic.

So how difficult was it to assimilate with the locals and social customs in an area deeply rooted in Islamic traditions?

"It was a real learning curve," says McNeill. "Simply pointing the soles of your feet at anyone is regarded as highly offensive, although locals in the main are understanding of social blunders."

"I do recall an embarrassing moment when I asked a local driver if I could purchase a sheep to put in the freezer. We drove to the outskirts of town to a saleyard where he told me to pick out which one I liked. I selected the one with the nicest eyes."

"The driver arranged to take the sheep to the butchers to be cut up. I was so excited that

we would soon be dining on roast lamb and chops, but to my dismay it arrived cut up into one inch cubes, bones and all. For the next two months Beth and I lived on stews and curries."

Like most Australians who take the plunge to work in the Middle East, there is an upside. Wages are tax-free, accommodation and vehicle are supplied and children receive free education. "They really look after you and as an added bonus they fly you home twice a year so you can catch up with family and friends," says McNeill.

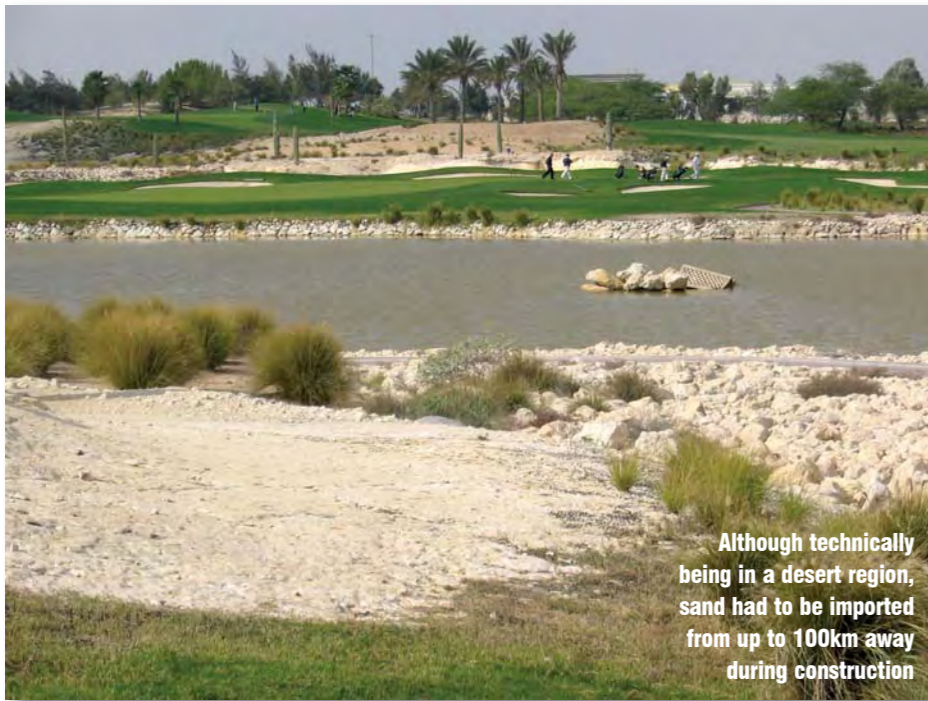
According to McNeill the highlight each year in Dubai was the rugby season. Back in his playing days McNeill was an accomplished league player, a hard-hitting lock forward who almost invariably topped the tackle count.

"I had never played rugby union before going to Dubai but enjoyed the game immensely, particularly the social side of things," says McNeill. "They flew us to most games, places like Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. You would end up with plenty of scratches and loss of skin as the playing fields were mostly sand with a few seashells thrown in for good measure."

MIDDLE EAST UNREST

In 1990 the McNeills were faced with an unexpected decision. With the outbreak of the Gulf War, the area was deemed as being volatile and unsafe. McNeill's parents were phoning daily concerned for their welfare and with Beth five months pregnant at the time the decision was made to leave the region.

"There was a lot of talk about chemical warfare and with Beth being pregnant we had no alternative but to leave," recalls McNeill. "I was lucky enough to find work in the UK as golf course manager at two championship courses in Essex and Leeds. At least the weather was somewhat milder and I could watch plenty of rugby league and cricket on TV."



Although technically being in a desert region, sand had to be imported from up to 100km away during construction

With the Gulf War coming to an end, and through a contact in Dubai, McNeill was coaxed into returning to the Middle East, this time to Doha, Qatar some 370km north of his previous base in Dubai. McNeill says the offer was “too good to refuse”, helping with the construction and management of a course from scratch which had always been a dream of his.

“It was a daunting task to say the least,” says McNeill. “The site chosen for construction was an old quarry. There was nothing but rocks and the odd palm tree. We had to import sand from 100km away to help grow grass and fill the bunkers.”

Doha Golf Club occupies 150 hectares in total, of which 60ha is grassed. Facilities include an 18-hole championship course, a fully lit nine-hole academy course, a large practice putter, practice tee, the Qatar Golf Academy and a magnificent Arabian-style clubhouse which is an attraction in itself.

The course was designed by renowned architect Peter Harradine and opened in 1995. Harradine’s design and philosophy relies on the natural preservation and enhancement of existing sites to create a unique course for a particular location. The natural features of the desert have been preserved and enhanced with the inclusion of artificial lakes, some holding potable water (treated by desalination plants for irrigation) and others containing sea water.

The site is extremely rocky and construction involved excavating and crushing most of the rock before the natural dune sands containing a small percentage of clay were used to cap the base material.

The course is totally grassed with a

combination of Tifgreen and Tifway. During the cooler months, greens are over sown with 6kg/100m² of *Poa trivialis* and the roughs and tees are oversown with perennial ryegrass at 150kg/ha. For the 2005 Qatar Masters, a small approach area in front of greens was oversown with *Poa trivialis*. Due to the extreme summers (>40°C) transitioning out the oversown species is not an issue.

Money appears to be no object in this part of the world and if McNeill needed anything it was simply a matter of getting it shipped in. For instance, large cactuses were imported all the way from Arizona to complement the huge limestone rock features which form a key part of the striking golf course landscape.

As with most golf courses in this day and age water is a big issue, but not so in Doha. Millions of litres of water are pumped from the Persian Gulf each year and treated by large scale desalination plants.

Water is stored on site in eight large artificial lakes with a specially designed irrigation system having the ability to pump



Doha Golf Club’s magnificent Arabian-style clubhouse is an attraction in itself

3000 gallons a minute. This is achieved by six pumps and three jockey pumps, of which five main and two jockey pumps are in operation at any one time. This allows the entire course to be watered in 12 hours using up to 6500m³ of water per night.

During his time at Doha, McNeill oversaw a crew around 70 which also included landscape workers. The golf club has been involved in a number of landscape projects outside of the course and McNeill was charged with maintaining the Al Arabi Sports Complex, Al Sadd Stadium and Khalifa Stadium, the home of the 2006 Asia Games.

TOURNAMENT TIME

One of the highlights for McNeill over the years has been preparing the course for the Qatar Masters which has become a regular stop on the European Tour. Doha hosts two major tournaments for the year – the 36-hole Qatar Open (amateur) and the Masters which is a co-sanctioned event with the European and Asian tours. The Masters was first played at Doha in 1998 and is one of the longest layouts on the European Tour.

Greens are cut at 4mm for the Masters and do not run much faster than 10-10.5 feet due to a couple of exposed greens. The grassed rough is cut at three lengths – a triplex-width cut at 25mm (short rough); another at 50mm (step rough); and outside that at 100mm (long rough) before the grassed surface disappears into natural sands and gravel of the desert.

Missing the fairway can be fraught with danger as there is only a small area of grassed rough between the fairway and desert. In 2002 a severe sandstorm caused the cancellation of the first round when 2mm of sand was deposited on all holes.

McNeill has had the pleasure of watching the game’s elite tackle the course and its unique conditions during his time and earlier this year was on hand as Australian Adam Scott fired an incredible final round 61 to collect his second Qatar Masters title.

At the 2002 Masters, McNeill was fortunate enough to team up with Scott to win the Pro-Am prior to the main event.

“Playing with a fellow Aussie was fantastic,” recalls McNeill. “I gave him some good tips on how the course played, hazards to avoid and speed of the greens.”

“When Adam won the 2008 Masters he made mention of me in his victory speech, alluding to the fact that my tips in 2002 came flooding back to him which helped maintain his focus in the final round.”

For McNeill, the 2008 tournament would be his last overseeing maintenance at Doha Golf Club as he and his family had decided by then to return to Australia to begin the next chapter in their lives. Beth arrived back in 2007, while McNeill returned home recently and is now based on the Gold Coast.

“Twenty one years is a long time to be away from family and friends, although we forged many strong relationships with people from all over the world during our time abroad,” says McNeill.

“Beth has been fantastic and very supportive; we have two beautiful children in Kate and Brennan who have been fortunate enough to experience life in a completely different environment.”



Doha Golf Club is totally grassed with a combination of Tifgreen and Tifway couch

So what does the future hold for McNeill? In the interim he will be travelling back and forth from Australia to Doha to ensure the new landscape manager makes an easy transition and there is also the possibility that McNeill will undertake some consultancy work given his vast experience working overseas.

“I hope to get my own website up and running and undertake consulting work in

Australia and possibly overseas,” says McNeill. “The Middle East and parts of Asia is where it’s all happening at the moment so hopefully a new project may come my way.”

“My main focus at the moment though is to enjoy the wonderful Aussie lifestyle, play the odd round of golf on the Gold Coast and watch the Titans in the NRL. But deep down I will miss my oasis in the desert.” 🌵