

# DESTINATION **Paraparaumu Beach**





# Natural good looks

Links golf is enjoying a resurgence worldwide, which prompted **Peter Lampp** to check out Paraparaumu Beach, which has undergone a restoration

Paraparaumu Beach is reverting to its roots, even if they only go back 60 years. Arguably New Zealand golf's spiritual home, it was built as recently as 1949 and its ecology has always set the links apart. That essentially was the purpose of our visit on a sunny Kapiti Coast day.

Paraparaumu having hosted 12 New Zealand Opens, it's always a privilege to tread its dunes, even if the course invariably bites back, as it did this day. Not every club golfer appreciates the natural ambience but professionals mostly enjoy playing a course where nature rather than a bulldozer has created the architecture.

Somehow, Paraparaumu seemed different

this time. The turf on the fairways seemed tighter, the greens faster, the rough cleaner, a few trees gone, most of the bunkers revetted Scottish style, and the welcome was cordial.

As we putted out on the par-4 ninth, we were introduced to Ian Ewen, a founding member of the club who is still playing at 94 years of age. He knew Paraparaumu during its gestation and was full of historical anecdotes.

Many of the most intriguing stories relate to the par-5 18th, the scene of many famous New Zealand Open finishes. There's the plaque where Kiwi pro Grant Waite slotted his 2-iron from 195 metres for an albatross during the 1992 Open.

International visitors invariably include

Paraparaumu on their itineraries, with the Tiger Woods Open of 2002 playing a big part in its world profile. There have been various world ratings in the top 100, but renowned American course architect Tom Doak rated it in his world's top 14 links courses. That's high praise as far as Kapiti Coasters are concerned.

Two years ago, Paraparaumu responded to an initiative from the Royal & Ancient rulers in Scotland and formulated a policy on course management. Essentially, the club wanted the course to revert to its natural state. Former pro golfer turned course designer Greg Turner was the catalyst, adding bunkers on holes seven, 12 and 18.

Nature and restoration came though loud



Paraparaumu copped unwanted publicity after the Tiger Open, mostly regarding its financial status

and clear from club pro Dominic Sainsbury and course superintendent Leo Barber, with whom we teamed up, as they despatched controlled draws all around the course. I personally inspected more remote features of the links over four hours as the scorecard played second fiddle to the notebook.

At the first tee, Barber was introduced as the general manager... and the greenkeeper! What? Yes, he does the double at what he describes as the best links in the southern hemisphere.

Paraparaumu has always been a great layout, despite a tacky clubhouse frontage and an intrusive high-rise block of flats nearby. Lovers of resort and parkland courses might disagree but this is traditional golf. No lakes... just 35 bunkers, wispy rough and a sea of dunes invoking rogue bounce. The par-4 13th and 17th holes are world-



class, the 17th with its double fairways.

The four par threes are all great in the true sense of great. I watched Aussie pro Andre Stolz hole-in-one on the 16th in 2001; it was the best way of ensuring the ball didn't go pinging off the steep sides of the green.

There's the par-4 sixth; all right it's only 286 metres and Tiger drove it with his 3-wood, but there's a dicey two-tiered green. There's the ultra-slick green on the par-4 15th following a 'links' blind tee-shot.

Paraparaumu copped unwanted publicity after the Tiger Open, mostly regarding its financial status. The club spent up large, modernising its buildings, which sent Paraparaumu Beach into a financial lurch. Seven years on, the club says it has scrambled back to a more secure footing.

"We undertook capital projects which in hindsight were a little ambitious," said

Barber. "But we've squared up and the books are in a healthy position and we have made a surplus for the past two seasons."

When Barber began as an apprentice at the now defunct Whitby course down the road on Wellington's outskirts, Paraparaumu Beach was his dream job. So off he went to Royal Melbourne for four years, was second-in-charge at North Shore in Auckland and then superintendent at Mt Maunganui for three years.

Early in 2006, Paraparaumu Beach superintendent Brian Hinton retired after 35 years and Barber grabbed his chance. Last year, when he assumed the dual role, the club appointed James Newell as his deputy on the turf side. Newell undertook his apprenticeship at Karori in Wellington before heading to Cape Kidnappers.

Paraparaumu employs only six greens

staff, including Barber who keeps his hand in and says, "You can't greenkeep from an office."

He's out on the course once or twice a day; he'll still cut greens and holes, and he plays once a week. It helps that he lives just over the fence.

As befitting a links, there's limited fairway watering at Paraparaumu, mostly set up manually. Natural wetlands come into play in dry summers.

"We irrigate as little as possible, only enough to keep the greens alive, not to keep them green," Barber stresses.

While we chatted about grasses, I was reminded that links have a natural summer character. I had to get "green" out of my head.

"The beauty of links is they change with the seasons," Barber said. "I like working with nature, using the materials on the site."

If he needs a new bunker, he simply digs one.

Paraparaumu has had only four course superintendents in its lifetime and it's hard to see Barber making way for the fifth in the foreseeable future.

Turn up to Paraparaumu any time and Barber will have the greens slick, like 11 on the stimpmeter. My epidemic of three-putts testified to that. He prefers greens running consistently all year round rather than honing them for weekend play and tournaments. For 95 per cent of players the course plays hard enough but for an Open Barber can ramp it up.

"We may struggle a bit for length but we're not chasing the length game. Set up the course hard and fast and there's enough challenges."

When he arrived, his aim, rather than building black Tiger tees, was to have 18 level tees. The hedge on the fourth tee was uprooted, opening up the natural, rolling vista.

"Exotic vegetation has no place in a natural setting," he said.

As we chatted on the clubhouse balcony, his remarks had a cutting edge as he pointed out some healthy, colourful heaths on a nearby ridge. They too are exotics.

Already Norfolk Pines have quietly disappeared. There is a use for one Norfolk though, on the 17th; You aim for it off the tee.

An essential part of links golf is the wind and at Paraparaumu it prevails off nearby Kapiti Island, a nor-westerly. That brings out the player who can play under the wind, the bump and run which brings the ground into play.

Barber identifies a group of 80-year-olds who use guile rather than strength to

navigate their way around Paraparaumu.

For Kiwis stuck at the bottom of the world, the green fee is worth it just to see the new revetted bunkers and the walls layered in the fashion of those in Scotland and Ireland. It's not only for cosmetic purposes but for stability of the sand too. Barber showed us some of the six bunkers yet to be revetted and the sandy edges were eroding.

When the revetting idea came to him, he was lucky to have an Irish deputy at the time, Ger Guiry, now the superintendent at Ngamotu in New Plymouth.

He has a plot where large rectangular slabs are cut and then placed layer on layer, like laying bricks. The result is a dramatic British Open look which has given the bunkers back their shape, although they're not as deep as the pots of St Andrew's.

The rough doesn't get mowed. It changes through the seasons, and as Barber said, "you don't have to take driver off the tee."

To promote fescue and browntop grasses in the rough, Barber is slowly eradicating pasture grasses like Yorkshire Fog, as well as bracken fern and lupins. For turf aficionados, the greens are a mix of browntop and poa annua, the fairways are poa, browntop and fescue... tight-growing grasses.

Barber would love to see the New Zealand Open return to Paraparaumu. Currently it shares the record with Shirley (Christchurch). They've staged 12 Opens each.

The club has found membership rises when it hosts the Open.

"It is our natural showcase and it needs to go around the country. This is such a good spectators' course." ☺



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## PARAPARAUMU BEACH GOLF CLUB FACT FILE

**Location:** 376 Kapiti Road, Paraparaumu Beach, 40 minutes drive from Wellington

**Phone:** (04) 902 8200

**Website:** [www.paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz](http://www.paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz)

**Email:** [bookings@paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz](mailto:bookings@paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz)

**Members:** 530 men, 170 women

**Subscriptions:** Full playing - \$1200 (\$25 a week); 9-hole - \$600.

**Director of golf:** Neil Munro

**Course superintendent/general manager:** Leo Barber

**Green fees:** \$55 (affiliated), \$75 (NZ non-affiliated), \$110 (international)

**Course designer:** Alex Russell (Aust) 1949

**Par:** men 71, women 73

**Length:** Men's - Black, 6020m; Blue, 5916m; White 5490m. Women's: Yellow 5198m

**Men's slope rating:** Black 125 72.4, Blue 125 NZCR 72.0, White 120 NZCR 69.8

**Women's slope rating:** 125 NZCR 73.5

**Course record:** 62 – Bob Charles, Maurice Bembridge, Paul Gow, Bradley Iles.

**NZ Opens (12):** Winners - 1959 Peter Thompson; 1966 Bob Charles; 1972 Bill Dunk; 1984 Corey Pavin; 1988 Ian Stanley; 1989 Greg Turner; 1991 Rodger Davis; 1992 Grant Waite; 1993 Peter Fowler; 1996 Michael Long; 2000 Michael Campbell; 2002 Craig Parry.

