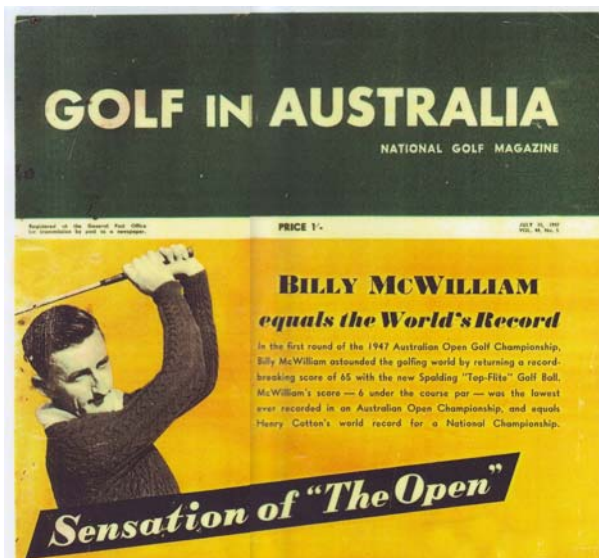


## Bill McWilliam – Legend of The Park

By Matt Cleary

After completing the first round of the 1947 Australian Open at Royal Queensland, it was reckoned by “everyone who knew the least thing about golf” that Horace “Ossie” Pickworth, would go on and win. He was reigning champion, the standout best player in Australia “and that’s just that”, and a “fellow with no hampering inhibitions, modesties or other such things, particularly when they relate to himself,” according to *Golf In Australia* magazine.

But Pickworth – whom *Golf In Australia* described was “sanely certain” of victory - would receive the jolt of his golfing life when Beverley Park’s Billy McWilliam, 26, shot a world record-equalling 65 (9-under) to lead the field by eight strokes. When McWilliam – who was Beverley Park’s head pro at the time - maintained his lead across the next two rounds despite the “fierce light of publicity”, he went into the last day leading Pickworth by four. Before the tournament McWilliam was 100-1 and described as a “no-accounter”. But with 18 holes to play in the national championship a country two years out of war found itself willing the underdog home.



But there would be no fairytale. Pickworth’s “mechanical perfection” and “lusty strength, clear head, and better equipment of the masterly shot-maker” came “thundering down on the almost exhausted man of little experience but tremendous heart”. Pickworth would win by five shots. But it was McWilliam who’d given the tournament its story.

Like all the sportsmen of his era, it’s impossible to know what McWilliam might have achieved had he not served six years with the AIF in World War II. What is known is the massive influence McWilliam had on golf, particularly

junior golf, in this country. As Norman Von Nida said in *The Daily Telegraph*: “It is timely to hand a pat to the silent service of a man who has probably done more for the very young in golf than any other Australian.”

Frederick William “Billy” McWilliam grew up in Mascot and from the age of 12 knew he wanted to be a professional golfer. He began a traineeship at Brighton Golf Club and was given a set of clubs by Von Nida, clubs he later used to beat The Von. He went on to win the 1940 NSW Open before six years with the 51st Field Park Company, 1st Infantry Division, RAE, serving at Milne Bay and New

Britain in Papua New Guinea. Along with golf tips it's understood McWilliam provided the company's bookmaking services.

On his return he began a stint at Goulburn where he tutored a young Bruce Devlin, who would win 17 titles around the world. In 1948 McWilliam began tutoring 13-year-old Bruce Crampton (at The Park) who would win 14 times on the PGA Tour and four-times finish runner-up to Jack Nicklaus in major championships.

In 1949 McWilliam finished equal-third with Peter Thomson in the Australian Open played at Bonnie Doon behind his great mate Eric Cremin. He won the 1954 Federal Open in Canberra and won there again in '55. But teaching was McWilliam's greatest gift. With his mentor Claude Davis he lobbied successfully for golf to be part of school sport curriculum. He instigated and helped stage the first state and Australian school championships (the NSW Schoolboys Championship was played at The Park in 1949). He took a 15-year-old Crampton to NSW Golf Club and challenged head professional George Kay to a game. Kay set the course up tough: back tees, tight pins. Crampton shot 4-under 68 on what was his first look at the course. It's unknown if any money changed hands.

Says Kogarah boy Crampton: "Our association began in 1948 when I was a youngster in short pants looking for lost golf balls around the perimeter of Beverley Park Golf Course. He taught me from the day I started playing golf, guided me through my amateur career (his wife Marge and I won the Beverley Park G. C. mixed foursomes club championship together), employed me as one of his assistants during my two-year apprenticeship, and was always there for me during my professional career, and offering advice and positive input."

Throughout the '50s and '60s McWilliam coached and advised hundreds of Park members to reach their potential. Beverley Ross won the NSW Open. Ray Morton, Mick Jones and Warwick Richardson – now President of NSWGC - enjoyed success at schoolboy and state level.

In 1975 a 20-year-old Greg Norman drove from Queensland in his Cortina to begin a traineeship at The Park under the "coaches' coach". Norman wrote in his book of his "unbounded delight" at being apprenticed under "one of Australia's most famous golf instructors". But it was no holiday for the man several years from being coined the Great White Shark. He would rise at 4am and finish work well after dark.

"My day-to-day routine as an apprentice under Billy McWilliam was gruelling. [But] I was delighted that my first steps in professional golf were to be guided by such a man." Yet with the NSW PGA unwilling to grant full playing status to the highly-ambitious Norman, McWilliam advised his charge to return to Queensland and join the Queensland PGA. Norman went on to enjoy some success.

As would David Graham, another professional who routinely came to McWilliam seeking swing advice. Graham won the US PGA in 1979 and the US Open in '81. In 1970 Graham partnered Devlin to the World Cup in Argentina, surely one of McWilliam's proudest achievements.

Sarah Kemp, another of McWilliam's more recent success stories along with fellow Park player Marousa Polias, has always always acknowledged the master coach's tutelage. In 2006 just after turning professional Kemp said: "I didn't know turning pro and winning tournaments could be so much fun. I am very positive, I'm always thinking like a winner which is what Mr Mac tells me to do all the time." In 2008 Kemp gained her US LPGA Tour card.

"I first met Mr Mac at Beverley Park when I was 12-years-old," recalls Kemp. "He'd always tell me: keep believing in yourself and never give up. As a teacher he would go to any length to help me improve. One time he brought a sand box to the driving range. He'd built it himself to help me with my long bunker shots.

"As a man he was just a genuinely great person. He was like a grandfather. He cared about me and my whole life, not just my golf development. When I was little Bill was concerned about me practicing in parks by myself so he gave me a whistle to carry with me in case I got in any trouble. If I did I was to blow it really loud. I still carry that whistle in my golf bag today."



Golf, however, was only one of McWilliam's passions, the other being the St. George Dragons Rugby League Club. After each try was scored McWilliam would organise boys from Marist Brothers Kogarah to sing "Oh when the Saints go marching in". He was often brought into the dressing sheds to address the team. There's a stone with his name on the Legends Walk that runs beside Kogarah-Jubilee.

For the best part of sixty years McWilliam, who lived within a pitch of Beverley Park's 10th green, would teach young golfers for free. Wandering the fairways with his various dogs, he would offer free advice on grip, posture, tempo and swing to sometimes perplexed, usually chuffed but always well-advised young golfers. With older golfers such as Beverley Park President Frank Bates and Dragons "Immortal" Johnny Raper, McWilliam was more succinct.

"I was a young copper and wanted to have a go at this golfing lark," recalls Bates. "And some mates from the force suggested I come down and see Bill and get a lesson or two, so I did.

"Bill watched me swing the club a few times and hit a few balls and said, 'You've come to me six years too late. You'll make a reasonable social player.' I was like, 'Thanks Bill!' But of course he was completely right."

Raper had a similar experience. Speaking at McWilliam's memorial service Raper told the congregation: "Bill said to me, 'You handle the football, Johnny, much better than a golf club.' I wanted to hit the ball like [single-figure handicapper] Reg Gasnier but I soon realised Bill was right."

Bill McWilliam was a life member of the PGA and in 2004 was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for "service to golf as a coach and by encouraging young people and women to enter the sport."

Another OAM, Jack Newton, a fellow rabid rugby league fan, is in many ways the flag bearer of McWilliam's work in junior golf development. Newton rates McWilliam with Kel Nagle as the "finest gentlemen I have met in golf".

“Bill probably never got the recognition The Von got – Bill wasn’t as flamboyant or outspoken - but he played a major part in the early development of Bruce Crampton, Bruce Devlin and more recently Sarah Kemp - to name a few!

“I learnt a long while ago never to say negative word about the Dragons,” adds Newton with a laugh. “But I’m sure with Wayne Bennett there now plenty of the old stories about Billy will be getting an airing.”

In 1979 McWilliam was offered the plum role of head professional at the prestigious Royal Selangor Golf Club in Malaysia. On taking up the posting McWilliam assured his friends that it’s “not about the money. I just want to make a lot of people happy with their golf.”

From others it may have sounded trite. From Bill McWilliam it summed up the man to a tee.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without him,” adds Sarah Kemp. “He’s very much missed.

“He’s a legend.”

