

THE ARTIST

Australian course designer Ross Perrett on surviving a stroke, honouring Peter Thomson's legacy, linking arms with Karrie Webb and how he hopes to win the Archibald Prize. **With Michael Davis**

I had a fair bit going on in the lead-up to suffering a stroke in May last year. I was bitterly disappointed members of The National had voted to 'bulldoze' the Ocean course built by Peter Thomson. I also had been let down on another matter by two people whom I thought were my friends; and, probably the worst of all of them, I had been at Barnbougle with 20 blokes for a week playing golf and had been 'on the turps' big time (quite stupidly, as it turned out) to ease the stress. When I got home I went straight to a birthday party on the Saturday night and celebrated Mother's Day with yum cha before a slap-up Italian lunch with our future in-laws.

I was exhausted when we got home. I wrote a couple of letters to clients and one to myself. I do not recollect writing the one to myself. The next morning, I suffered a 'massive hypertension blast'. My blood pressure went to 190. The walls started moving and I was in a bit of strife. 'Tupp', my wife, rang an ambulance and she did all the tests for a stroke and it was obvious what had happened. I walked to the ambulance and was taken to the Alfred. By that time I could not stand up. I could hear what the doctor was saying to my wife. He said, "If he makes it until Wednesday, then he could have a chance of surviving."

I spent 10 days in the Alfred followed by 13 weeks in rehab at Caulfield Hospital

and eventually got home. After the stroke I was paralysed down the right side. I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk, I couldn't swallow, I couldn't smell. I was pretty 'rooted'.

During my rehabilitation, I realised family and friends are the most

important things in your life. I now also really appreciate the health workers and people I did not even think about. I had six hours' work with therapists every day in hospital and nine sessions a week after I came home.

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PERRETT THINKS OF THE LEGENDS COURSE AT MOONAH LINKS AS HIS BEST WORK SO FAR.

in Australia – one every nine minutes – and that number is increasing all the time. Not many people make a full recovery, either. Now I still can't write with my right hand and I am right-handed. I am walking OK now. I have got my taste back and my speech is improving all the time. I am playing golf again, thanks to Bruce Green at Royal Melbourne. Bruce is another stroke victim, who thankfully has made a full recovery. A stroke 'kills' your brain cells so I have to find different pathways to do things I used to do, including playing golf. Your body compensates for your deficiencies. People should always have regular health checks to guard against a potential stroke.

I have always loved painting. I wanted to be an artist and win the Archibald Prize from the time I was 10 and won the art prize in the junior school at Scotch College. I also wanted to play AFL (then VFL) football for Melbourne. The footy dream has gone but I have entered a self-portrait in the Archibald. I was confident I could do a good painting, although I am not dexterous enough to do fine work, having been forced to paint left-handed after the stroke. My entry is

THERE ARE A LOT OF SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PETER THOMSON AND KARRIE WEBB. NEITHER PUTS ON AIRS AND GRACES



a self-portrait entitled *Concussion*. It has a main picture and smaller panels depicting all the concussions I suffered playing Australian Rules football with University Blacks in the elite VAFA competition. The latest research in the USA suggests concussions suffered on the sporting field can lead to strokes later in life. It is a fact that your musical and artistic ability is enhanced after suffering a stroke. Eventually I want to become a full-time artist.

I had spent 11 years at the University of Melbourne studying Architecture and Landscape Design before I met Peter Thomson in the 1980s. I knew his story, but I did not realise he was a genius who could turn his hand to anything. A friend's father was the principal of Brunswick Technical School in Melbourne's then working-class suburb of Brunswick, where Peter grew up. He said "Thommo" was the best cricketer and footballer to ever go through the school. I couldn't believe the bad press Peter used to get. People used to say he was a snob. That was so far from the truth. Peter was a very caring, genuine person. Peter was like a best friend and father figure to me. He had a quirky sense of humour and the ability to simplify the most complicated things. He was just wise.

Peter told me, "If you come and work for me, you'll get things built." I had designed a lot of golf courses but none of them had been built. Ten years after I met Peter, I became a partner in Thomson, Wolveridge, Perrett, which later became Thomson Perrett. Then Peter became ill and retired. Together with Michael Wolveridge, we built more than 100 golf courses in 40 countries.

"Thommo" thought the championship layout at Moonah Links was his magnum opus. I think my best work so far has been the Legends, which sits alongside it. It was Peter's dying wish that I make some changes to the championship course. Once they no longer played the Australian Open there, Peter wanted to make it more 'member friendly' by making it a bit easier to enjoy. I am thinking of applying to the National Trust to have the layout classified. My latest overseas project is in Delhi, where we are renovating



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India's only public course, Qutub. The course hosts 300 players a day and each one has a caddie. It costs about five dollars for a round. In Australia, I am renovating Queensland's Indooroopilly course in partnership with Karrie Webb.

There are a lot of similarities between Peter Thomson and Karrie Webb. Neither puts on airs and graces. They are both absolutely honest, proud Australians. Karrie is humble and, like Peter, is herself wherever she goes. Peter and Karrie managed to reach great heights in their golf careers but at the same time retain their almost child-like innocence. Peter said Karrie Webb was the best golfer in Australia when she was just 24

years of age. That was long before anyone else did. It was always our plan to form an allegiance with Karrie. Peter liked Karrie a lot. They had a lot in common apart from both being great golfers.

Karrie is a proud Queenslander and Indooroopilly is delighted to have her involved. Peter and I both knew and liked Karrie and had worked with her on a number of projects, including the unsuccessful tender to build the course for golf's inclusion in the Rio Olympic Games. Even though I was a bit of a mess and recovering from my stroke, Karrie did not hesitate to form a partnership with me, once Indooroopilly requested it. Say no more. ☺