

'Build it and they will come'

About 15 years ago there was movie called *Field of Dreams*, where the lead character played by Kevin Costner built a baseball diamond and legendary stars of the past, as well as fans and aspiring players of the present, turned up in droves to see and experience what he had constructed in the cornfields of Iowa.

"Build it and they will come", were the words ringing in Costner's ears.

Now whether a movie deal is in the offing for Rohan Walker remains to be seen, but perhaps he did hear a similar voice calling him from above.

For 10 years the professional at Phillip Island, Victorian PGA member Rohan Walker had a dream. He hoped to build and operate a golf course. Walker had a vision to build a course where he could teach young kids the basics of the game and to provide a short game facility to match anything else available around the country, something which would attract professionals, PGA members and golfers of all levels. He planned to build it, a golfing facility with a point of difference, in a tourist town. He was confident that "they would come," and Walker is well on his way to delivering all that he dreamt about.

"I wanted to be able to walk out my back door onto 'my' golf course," Walker said. "Ever since the first time I picked up a club I dreamed of having my own course."

The Aussie Golf Ranch at Redrock's Homestead, located by the beach at Phillip Island, famous as the home town of the fairy penguins and the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix and situated just an hour and half from Melbourne's eastern suburbs, is the result of Walker's endeavours. But it has been a work in progress and a testing labour of love. For a time the fairytale turned into a nightmare, before plenty of blood, sweat and tears got it back on track, with Walker's story one of admirable perseverance.

In 2002 Walker went in search of a patch of suitable land and council approval to build his course. He then applied for the planning permit, personally dealt with local councils, produced a 50 page environmental management plan

and was involved in all aspects of developing the project. But just when it looked too good to be true, with the doors set to open, it all came crashing down. With the course complete in September 2006, before seven weeks of irrigation through October and November, Walker was only days from opening for business and enjoying the rewards of his efforts. One course would be a Ross Watson-designed par-three layout, offering nine-holes measuring from 103 to 183 metres. The second nine would be a pitch and putt course, while shorter and less demanding, it too would feature Santa Anna couch tees and fairways and G2 bent greens.

All appeared rosy until the drought affecting the eastern seaboard of Australia delivered a cruel blow. Stage four water restrictions meant no access to mains water and despite trucking in water kindly donated from the dams of friendly farmers, coupled with around the clock efforts to keep the greens alive, on December 30, 2006, Walker watched all 20 greens die under the summer sun.

"We lost the whole course, it was devastating," Walker recalled.

Down but far from out, Walker kept at it and looked at ways to solve his irrigation issues, opting for a desalination unit which would enable the Aussie Golf Ranch to produce enough water to keep the grass growing and to continue the dream. Then on December 1, 2007, the Aussie Golf Ranch, both the nine-hole courses, were declared open for play, with Walker understandably proud of the finished product.

"The Ross Watson nine is the toughest set of par threes you'll ever see," he boasted. "It's a links style course with 19 bunkers and water in play on eight of the nine holes."

Already there is accommodation for 12-14

people at the Redrock's Homestead, with Walker teaching budding junior golfers, giving camps during the school holidays and clinics on a Saturday morning. Two putting and chipping greens provides a practice and teaching facility for golfers of all levels, while a pro shop is next on the agenda.

Open seven days a week, Walker explains that the Aussie Golf Ranch is ideal for PGA members to bring groups or they can utilise for their own practice. Also perfect for school groups to enjoy, for corporate functions and suitable for both beginners and the advanced – and its time 'friendly' taking only 90 minutes to play the longer course, 40 minutes on the pitch and putt.

And for a golf pro with a special interest in teaching the short game, Walker may have the ideal venue at which to perfect his craft. Now with it all coming together, Walker has ambition to become recognised as a one of the golfing world's premier short game 'gurus'. Who would doubt him?

"I want to be known as the 'Pelz of Australia' in 10-15 years," he said. "I'd love to have my own academy down here at Phillip Island."

A celebrity pro-am, perhaps an Australian PGA par-three tournament, the ideas keep rushing through Walker's head, and considering what he has already achieved, nobody is going to tell him he can't do it.

This is a man who built a golf course then saw it disintegrate before his eyes, before rebuilding and watching it develop into what could be rated as Australia's best par-three layout and just maybe, one day regarded as the country's premier short game facility.

