

# Does Golf Build Character, or Just Reveal It?

*When Mark Abeyaratne addressed the Golf Society of Australia, he traced fifty years in the game — and posed a question his grandfather first asked in Colombo.*

*The Long Game*

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**T**heir grandfather was a paediatrician — the leading paediatrician in Sri Lanka — and a devoted golfer at Royal Colombo Golf Club. When the Abeyaratne family left for Australia in 1974, he gave his son Hilary a piece of advice: get the boys into golf. It will build their character.

Fifty years later, his grandson Mark stood before the Golf Society of Australia at Peninsula Kingswood Country Golf Club and offered a gentle amendment. “Does golf build character,” he asked, “or does it just reveal it?”

It was the closing line of an address that had taken the room on a remarkable journey: from a privileged childhood in post-colonial Ceylon, through immigration to suburban Melbourne with almost nothing, to the building of Drummond Golf into a national enterprise of more than fifty stores with sales in excess of two hundred million dollars. At the heart of it, two brothers — Mark and Ravi Abeyaratne — and a game that shaped everything.

Mark’s question lingered in the room. It is worth turning over, because threaded through the Abeyaratne story are lessons that any golfer will recognise — about mentorship, patience, luck, and the quiet way the game reveals who we are.

## **The Chain of Giving**

No golfer is self-taught. Someone puts a club in your hand, walks you to the first tee, shows you how to grip it. The game is passed hand to hand, generation to generation, and the Abeyaratne story is proof of that chain.

It began with Seeya — the boys’ grandfather — who played his weekend fourballs at Royal Colombo while young Mark and Ravi wandered behind, watching the ceremonial handover of a prized Penfold golf ball from the loser to the winner, individually boxed and wrapped in soft tissue paper. Seeya passed the game to their father Hilary, who had been the family’s black sheep — sent to London to study law,

he came home a schoolteacher instead and reportedly wasn't spoken to for a decade. But Hilary excelled at sport, and golf above all, and when the family settled in Frankston in 1974, he took his sons out on Sundays to the public courses of the Mornington Peninsula.

From there, the chain lengthened. Bruce Green, the professional at Peninsula Country Golf Club, gave the teenage brothers a lesson that left a lasting impression — striking a five iron one hundred and seventy metres right-handed, then picking up Ravi's left-handed club and doing exactly the same thing. Trevor Flowerday, the professional at Mornington Golf Club, took Mark into the pro shop and taught him the craft of reconditioning wooden clubs in exchange for helping with his game. Jeff Flanagan, who ran a pioneering off-course retail shop called The Hole in One, taught both brothers the art of custom fitting long before it became fashionable.

And then there was Phil McKinnon. When McKinnon offered the brothers a franchise in his Drummond Golf network, they couldn't afford the full share. McKinnon funded the shortfall. The model he used — part-ownership, shared risk, a hand up rather than a handout — became the template Mark and Ravi would replicate for the next three decades, backing staff and friends into store ownership with them, mortgaging their own homes to make it happen.

In golf, nobody plays alone. Every swing carries the fingerprints of someone who came before.

## **The Long Game**

Golfers understand patience. The game punishes those who chase quick rewards and favours those who think in rounds and seasons, not individual shots. Mark Abeyaratne's career is a study in that kind of patience.

In 1981, he deferred his science degree at Monash University to work full-time in a golf shop turning over a million dollars a year. He never went back. In 1986, he and his wife Stella moved to Traralgon in Gippsland to build a store from scratch in an old cafeteria — fifty-hour weeks, six days a week, in a regional town where they knew no one. Stella, an educator by profession and a golfer herself, worked full-time in her own career while helping with the business whenever she could. When their daughter Emma arrived in 1989, Stella stepped away from the game to focus on raising and educating their children — a sacrifice Mark is quick to acknowledge.

Meanwhile, Ravi managed the Frankston store and built a reputation as one of the finest golf retailers on the Peninsula. Mark maintains that only one person in the industry could match Ravi behind a counter: Ray Drummond himself.

In 2002, the brothers seized the opportunity to buy the Drummond Golf brand. The vision Mark put to Ravi, to Stella, and to their accountant Jonathan Madgwick was bold: fifty stores nationally, sixty million dollars in turnover. At the time, there were twelve stores doing roughly twelve million. Their first chairman, David Mattingly — a legend of Australian retail marketing — agreed to guide them for far less than his expertise commanded, because he believed in them.

By 2010, they had their fifty stores and were turning over seventy-five million dollars. It had taken eight years of relentless expansion of selling franchises, of long drives between regional stores — Mark was putting seventy thousand kilometres on a car each year. Then he told the board he had five years left, and began counting down, one year at a time.

That is the long game. Not a single brilliant shot, but the willingness to keep walking the fairway.

### **The Bounce of the Ball**

Every golfer knows the fine line between fortune and catastrophe. The lip-out that costs you the match. The lucky bounce off a tree that finds the fairway. The shot that could have gone either way.

Mark and Ravi know that line better than most. In the mid-1990s, driving back from Traralgon, Ravi fell asleep in the passenger seat and Mark dozed off at the wheel with the car in cruise control at one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour. In the back of the station wagon were hundreds of golf balls in open buckets. Only two weeks earlier, they had fitted a cargo barrier. Mark wrote off the car in the accident that followed. By any reasonable measure, it should have killed them both.

*“This wasn’t the first time we got lucky,” Mark told the room. “We feel we have been that all our lives.”*

There is a pattern of fortunate timing in the Abeyaratne story that is hard to ignore. The family arrived in Australia in 1974 — the same year Ray Drummond sold a set of PGF clubs to a playing partner in Bendigo and founded what would become Drummond Golf. They settled in Frankston, seemingly by chance, at the start of the Mornington Peninsula and its extraordinary wealth of golf courses. A parent at Peninsula Grammar happened to suggest the boys could caddy at Peninsula Country Golf Club on Sunday mornings, which gave them access to the course that would shape their lives.

And then there was COVID. Mark is unflinching about this: for all its devastating consequences, the pandemic achieved more for golf participation in Australia than

Arnold Palmer, Greg Norman, and Tiger Woods combined. Drummond Golf, a ninety-million-dollar business before COVID, has since more than doubled. The new participants are younger, more diverse, and include a striking proportion of young professional women — a shift Mark believes has changed the game permanently.

Luck, in golf and in life, is not something you earn. But you can position yourself to receive it. The Abeyaratnes were always in position.

## **The Quality of the Cast**

Early in his address, Mark made an observation he never quite returned to: that fly fishing and golf have a lot more in common than many people would realise.

It is worth pausing on the thought. Both demand patience and a willingness to read conditions — the wind, the water, the lie of the land. Both reward rhythm and punish force. Both are solitary pursuits enjoyed best in company. Both connect you to landscape in a way that few other pastimes manage. And both, perhaps, reveal something about temperament that no amount of coaching can teach: the willingness to cast again, and again, and again, trusting that the process will deliver.

Mark and Ravi grew up fishing in the streams near their family's tea estate in the hills above Gampola, strictly catch and release. It was, Mark believes, where they first developed the passion for fly fishing they hold to this day. That the same childhood also gave them golf feels less like coincidence and more like confirmation: some people are drawn to pursuits that ask for patience, precision, and a long memory.

## **Character**

Today, both brothers are members at Peninsula Kingswood — the very place where, as teenagers, they caddied on Sunday mornings for the chance to play the North Course in the afternoon. It is, as Mark puts it, the full journey.

And what a journey. A mother who left everything behind at thirty-eight so her children could have a better life, and who is still with them at nearly ninety-one. A father who defied his family to follow his passion and taught his sons to do the same. A grandfather who believed the game could shape a person's character, and two grandsons who spent fifty years testing the proposition.

The mentors who reached back. The patience to build something over decades. The luck to survive the moments that could have ended it all. The quiet discipline of the cast, the shot, the next step up the fairway.

Does golf build character, or just reveal it? Mark Abeyaratne posed the question to the Golf Society of Australia and wisely left it unanswered. Perhaps the game does both — and perhaps that is why, after all these years, we keep coming back to it.

