

Michael Hill, retail jewellery  
giant, photographed at  
The Hills Golf Club.



# MICHAEL HILL, QUEENSTOWN, NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand's 2009 Entrepreneur of the Year on golf course design, Danny Lee's future and how the golf swing compares to playing the violin.

INTERVIEWED BY TONY WEBECK. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK HILL

**I've** had a love-hate relationship with golf. I was brought up in the North Island of New Zealand, at Whangarei just north of Auckland, and my parents always played golf. It's funny the way things work out. My parents had a very humble little house and I mowed 18 greens, put baked-bean cans in and formed the Red Star Golf Club. Looking back now it's quite funny. The local boys would come along and they would have to pay 1-and-6 to be a member and we had tournaments, just chipping and putting. It's funny how these things come back later in life.

When we moved back to New Zealand from Australia the first thing we did was put a green in front of the house. Then we put another couple of greens around the house and we made reasonably long par 3s out of them. You could play nine holes by using different tee placements to the same greens and we would raise money for charity. We had the All Blacks there and we also had a challenge against Millbrook. It became quite popular and one of the TV guys said to me, "I believe you have got a chip and putt course." And it was then that I thought to myself, *I don't want just a chip and putt course.*

I spoke with course architect John Darby, whom I knew quite well, and said to him, "Could you build me a fully fledged golf hole?" which is Dragonfly Lake, the sixth hole of The Hills as it now stands. He did that for me and it was so much fun that I thought, *Well, we have to build one back to the house,* and that became hole No.5 with that nasty little green that's up high and the bunkers off the side. So those were the first two holes and then he got me aside and said, "I reckon for \$4 million I could build you a proper golf course." We said yes to that and 5½ years and probably \$18 million later we completed it.

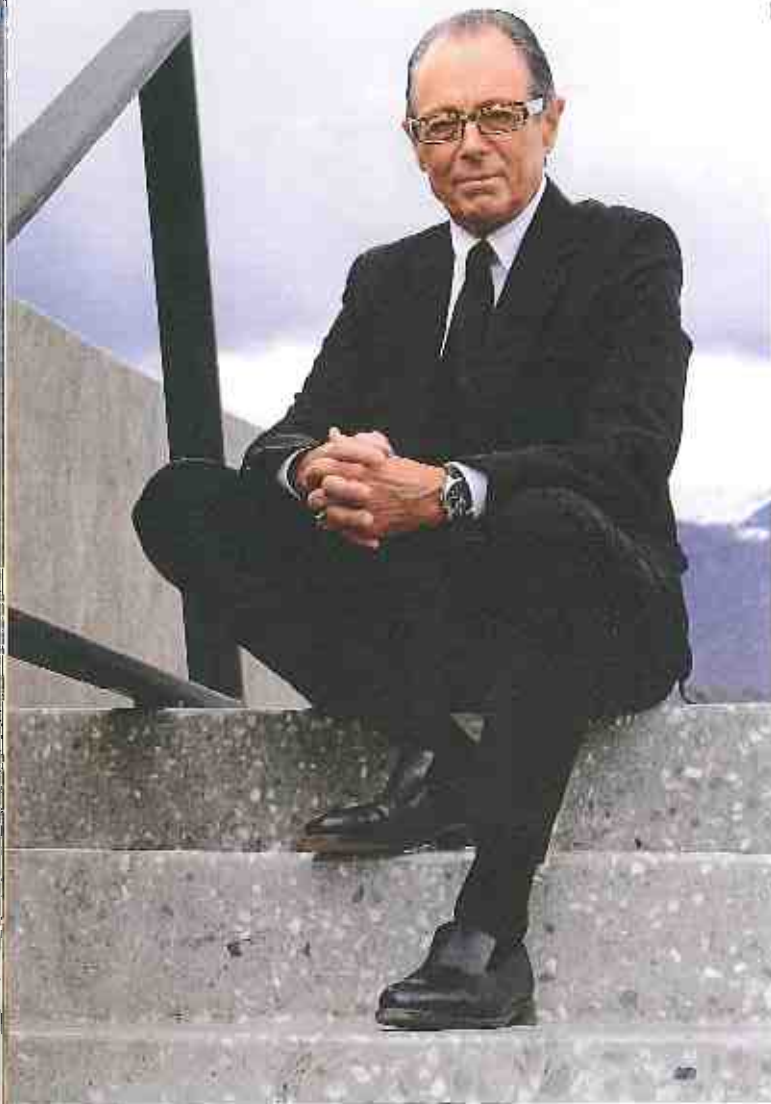
The way we did it was very unorthodox. The guy who was

my gardener just had a natural attribute for looking at the plan and forming the shapes for the bunkers. The greenkeeper from Millbrook joined me and we got a small crew and just gradually moved over the land and formed it. I then had Sir Bob Charles come and see me and he played the course when it was nearly finished and I could see he was pretty blown away by it. He was very excited and said to me, "I saw [Cape] Kidnappers and Kauri Cliffs when they were at this stage and I reckon this could be as good as that." I also wanted to create something like that in my own hometown, so that really gave me the impetus to carry on and make it a championship course.

When it came to the clubhouse we got Andrew Patterson down from Auckland and he thought it would be nice up here looking down over the 18th green. It won some premier architecture awards in New Zealand and came ninth in the sports and leisure section of the World Architecture Festival in Barcelona [in 2008] where it was up against 675 buildings. Some of those were the massive stadiums for the Olympics in Beijing and then you have this tiny wee clubhouse that came ninth, so that was pretty exciting.

What we have also done is design some homes on the property that are based on a similar principal to the clubhouse, which are almost underground and quite invisible – very Frank Lloyd Wright. They will blend in very beautifully with the landscape and in harmony with nature and eventually we will have the course for members and those home-owners and then we'll close the gates.

If you have got the right person, to guide them too much or put tight parameters on their scope of work, you usually end up with a slightly imperfect design. I tried to keep the price under control, especially with the clubhouse, but I didn't really



want to have any input into the design of the golf course. I did suggest a few holes that were quite similar to some in the States but basically I left it to them to have a free expression. That way you usually get the best out of people. I've never found it difficult to do that because it never ceases to amaze me what people will come up with if you find talented people, don't stand in their way, encourage them and don't inhibit them.

The secret of life is to delegate and to inspire people. We have got a great team here and at the start the clubhouse ran with very few people. Our former massage therapist is now the manager of the clubhouse and she is doing an amazing job. At most golf courses the greenkeepers are just focused on grass – all they can see is grass – but we have changed that around here. If we are a little busy they'll come in and serve as waiters or serve at the bar. What that has done is change attitudes enormously. If you empower people or make them part of something you get so much more out of the people working for you than just the old rigid idea of, 'This is your job,' and the tunnel vision that often comes with that. We do like people to multi-task and it's the same in the business.

All the excitement Danny Lee is generating is wonderful to see, but I suppose the tough thing is all the enormous pressure that must be on him. It must be a very interesting stage in his life; emotionally it is a huge challenge. I was living at Sanctuary Cove on the Gold Coast when Ian Baker-Finch won the British Open and it just snowballed and put this enormous amount of pressure on him. Some people find it difficult to deal with. I think the young man has got a strong mind, which is good.

Danny is going to have totally different demands on his time and it is important that he learns to be himself, not stress out too much. I think something like transcendental meditation would be beneficial for someone such as Danny to incorporate into his day. Wake up in the morning, do 20 minutes of meditation that will clear his mind of any self-talk or self-doubt. It does refresh one. It's something I have done for many years and it's very good for clearing the mind.

I think the golf swing is very interesting. I am a violinist myself and I have the Michael Hill International Violin Competition and what I find is that the two are very similar. The bowing of the violin is very much like swinging a golf club in that it is very difficult and very complex. To bring out the proper tone or enormous tone out of a small instrument is not the pressure exerted but an even and exact movement of the horsehair and getting it perfectly in line coming across the string. If it cuts across the string it loses quite an impetus of the vibration. So it's like the length of a golf swing. As it comes across the string it vibrates and resonates a lot and, of course, when you become nervous and a bit shaky it becomes very difficult to produce the right tones. So I think violin bowing is very similar to a golf swing as far as a degree of difficulty. I don't know two things that are more difficult to do, really. For me, anyhow.

What is really great is being able to give something back to two extremely difficult things: golf and music. That is a very odd combination and just as important. With the New Zealand Open we are giving back to the community, to New Zealand and Australasia, really, because I think our Australasian ties are becoming more and more important.

To succeed in golf or anything you need that obsession for one thing, but I'm able to have a variety of things that I like. I was never going to be a terrific golfer but I did want to be a violinist, only that my parents pushed me away from that and into the family jewellery business, which is probably the best thing they ever did. There's very little money and it's probably very difficult to be really happy playing the violin in an orchestra at odd hours.

All memorable games of golf are effortless, aren't they? Anything that is ever done well never seems to be an issue; it comes almost effortlessly and you wonder how easy it has become. That's a pretty rare moment for me. □