

Hard work pays off for patient Gillespie

Fred Woodcock
GOLF

NICK GILLESPIE'S golfing career has struck a green light again. The Hawke's Bay but soon-to-be Wellington amateur hit a "stop sign" during the past two years but it's all go again after a wire-to-wire victory at the North Island amateur strokeplay championships at the Hutt Golf Club this week.

Representing Hastings, Gillespie claimed a three-shot win over Shandon's Richard Pegg and Kieran Muir, of Omokoroa, to secure his second North Island title, three years after the first.

"It feels better than the first time, actually," he said yesterday after signing for an even-par final round of 70, which followed rounds of 67, 72 and 72 for a one-over par total of 281.

"It's a nice relief. I haven't been playing well the last few years so it's a good start to 2010 and it's nice to get the name back on the trophy."

Gillespie, son of former New Zealand cricketer Stu, is a former New Zealand representative and was a reserve for the Eisenhower team in 2008, but he felt as though his game had stalled during the past two years - till now at least.

"I just want to keep moving forward now. I've kind of hit a stop sign in the last couple of years with con-



Eyeing it up: Nick Gillespie lines up a putt during yesterday's final round of the North Island strokeplay championships. Gillespie went on to win by three strokes. Photo: ROBERT KITCHIN

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NICK GILLESPIE

fidence and wondering what I was doing, but it's nice to see the work that I put in over Christmas is starting to pay off."

He will move from Hawke's Bay to Wellington (the lucky club is Royal Wellington) in the next few weeks, to be with his university-bound girlfriend but also to give golf a crack fulltime. He'll still have to pay the bills, of course, and is hoping to find some work with a friend's dad.

"I really want to give golf a shot and this is certainly a great start to the year. There's still a lot of work to do, though."

The key to his win had been "just staying patient". He wasn't as consistent as he would have liked but hit some big shots when it counted.

"If I had a few rough holes I usually followed it up with a birdie or something, just to keep some momentum going. I didn't make too many big numbers."

Gillespie entered yesterday's final round level with Pegg but had opened up a three-shot lead by the end of the front nine.

The Shandon golfer narrowed the

gap to one with three holes to play, however, before Gillespie all but clinched the title on the 317m par-four 16th hole, getting up and down for a birdie after his booming, wind-assisted drive found a greenside bunker.

"It's been a while since I've been in that position leading a tournament so there were a few things going through my head that probably shouldn't have been," admitted Gillespie, who dropped shots on the

15th and 17th after wayward tee shots.

"But it was good having my little brother [Chris] on the bag.

"He told me to pick myself up - not in those exact words - a couple of times."

He had a two-shot lead approaching the short par-three 18th, one of the few holes at Hutt where water is in play, but he hit his tee shot to within 2m.

"Even though [the lake] was 40m

short and I only had 120m to the pin, I was still thinking 'what if, but I was really happy with the shot I hit in there, it was great to finish on that note. I'm really proud of myself."

The other player in the final group, Miramar's Thomas Spearman-Burn, began the day one shot behind Gillespie and Pegg but carded a four-over 74 for a six-over total and a share of fourth place, with Keelan Kilpatrick, of Russley.



Taking aim: Shooters in action during yesterday's inter-district teams rifle shooting match for the Ballinger Belt qualifying at Trentham.

Mehrtens hopes bulls-eye doesn't deny him glory

Sam Worthington
SHOOTING

SHOOTING bulls-eyes is the aim of the game but Bevan Mehrtens just hopes his unusual slip-up doesn't cost him the Ballinger Belt national championship at Trentham today.

The 52-year-old farmer from Canterbury is New Zealand's leading hope in second place but was ruing a meltdown at the range on Thursday.

"The worst thing is that I actually shot a wrong target so I'm actually five points behind what I should be, because it was actually a bulls-eye," Mehrtens said.

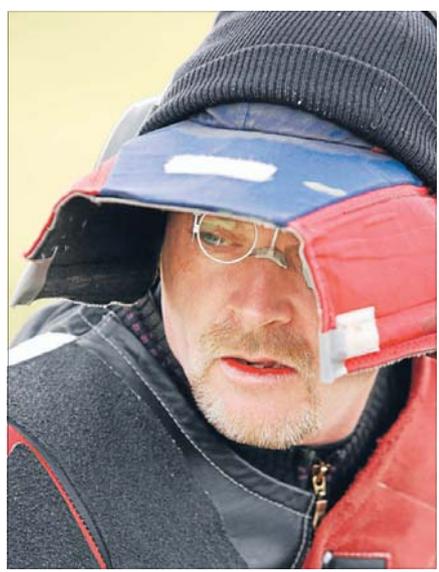
"It's unforgivable really, people are rubbing it in. I would have been clean, none down, if I hadn't hit the wrong target so I'm a bit humbled."

That aside, Mehrtens forgave himself enough to admit he'd had a "reasonable" week, coaching Canterbury to the regional teams title yesterday and sitting just a fraction of a point behind British leader James Watson.

Heavy, gusty winds yesterday meant a dramatic shake-up of the leaderboard, with the most notable slide being that of British hotshot Jon Underwood from first to fifth.

"A lot of the overseas guys obviously did struggle with it because most of them were in front of us [at the start of the day]," Mehrtens said.

"A lot of them had come here to experience the westerly conditions, the wind from behind that we normally get. But they haven't experienced any of it yet."



Having a break: Wellington's Jon Philipps takes a breather during yesterday's shoot. Photos: ROSS GIBLIN

Mehrtens appears to have a handle on the changeable winds but you could throw a blanket over a tightly congested top-10 ahead of today's final shoot.

"It's interesting, because the first 10 scores are so close, it's as if we haven't even started," Mehrtens said. "We're all going to enter on a level playing field, basically, and it will be one match, and at the end of it the winner will stand up. That's my feeling, that maybe the first 12

have got every opportunity."

The other leading Kiwi challenger is Waikato's Ross Geange, a double belt winner, in fourth.

Mehrtens has contested the belt since 1984 with a best finish of third. "Eighty-four was my first year, as a B-grader but I got in the top 50 that year and then spent 10 years learning how to get back in," he said.

Mehrtens just hopes his inadvertent bulls-eye doesn't deny him a taste of glory.

"I'll rue the day," he said. "But we'll be carrying on, it will be just another shoot like the others."

Canterbury won the regional teams event with a score of 943.73 points, shading Northern (934.66) and Wellington (930.66).

The top five shooters heading into the final day of the Ballinger Belt today are: 1 James Watson (Britain) 486.51 points, 2 Bevan Mehrtens (Canterbury) 486.50, 3 Jon Cloud (Britain) 486.47, 4 Ross Geange (Waikato) 486.35, 5 Jon Underwood (Britain) 485.64.

Fallon making a big mistake to put his club before his country

Tommy Smith
COMMENT

NEW ZEALAND FOOTBALL is right to play hard ball with striker Rory Fallon who is threatening to withdraw from the All Whites' friendly against Mexico in March to curry favour with his Plymouth Argyle club.

Fallon told a Plymouth newspaper that he wouldn't be upset if Argyle manager Paul Mariner "didn't let me go" to the Mexico game in Los Angeles.

Plymouth are dicing with relegation from England's second-tier Championship and have two vital games either side of the All Whites' match.

Fallon says Plymouth is "my No 1". His commitment is commendable. But he obviously lacks an understanding of international football regulations. The Mexico match will take place in an official Fifa international window. Plymouth do not have a choice. They must let Fallon

go, if he is fit.

It was thus gratifying to hear New Zealand Football chief executive Michael Glading say yesterday that he expected Fallon to front.

"We have rights and they're very limited rights, and they're rights that have been hard fought over the years by various associations with Fifa, so one wouldn't just actively back down from the rights that we have," Glading said.

If Fallon refuses to play in Mexico, it would be the second silly decision of his international career.

The big striker is a hero in New Zealand now after scoring the winning goal against Bahrain in Wellington last November as the All Whites qualified for this year's World Cup finals.

But Gisborne-born Fallon almost blew his chance of playing for New Zealand. He represented England at age-group level but was never going to play for their national senior team. Yet he failed to take advantage of a Fifa law

allowing players to switch allegiances to the nation of their birth before they turned 21.

Fallon should take a lead from All Whites' captain Ryan Nelsen. He has not always been able to play for the All Whites because of injuries and club commitments with Blackburn Rovers in the English premier league. But as the World Cup playoffs loomed last year, he insisted on playing in a friendly in Jordan, much to manager Sam Allardycy's ire.

The Blackburn skipper knew the World Cup must come first.

The same applies for Fallon. His absence in LA would seriously undermine the All Whites' World Cup preparation.

National coach Ricki Herbert said this week that he might use the Mexico game to see whether the 3-4-3 shape, which proved so successful against Bahrain, is sustainable against top-quality international opposition.

Fallon, as one of the three



Rory Fallon: Has opted to let his club manager decide whether he plays for New Zealand in a World Cup warmup match.

strikers, is fundamental to that formation.

Besides, his Bahrain goal aside, Fallon cannot take his place for granted. New Zealand have, for the first time, three other international quality strikers in Shane Smeltz, Chris Killen and Chris Wood.

The All Whites are unlikely to be able to afford the luxury of three frontrunners in South Africa. They may have to adopt a more conventional 4-4-2 formation.

So why would Fallon - approaching the highlight of his career - risk being relegated to the All Whites' bench?

Herbert happy with planned cup buildup

Tony Smith
FOOTBALL

ALL WHITES coach Ricki Herbert is hoping to have a couple of games in the United States or the Middle East, a home sendoff against a South American nation, up to three matches in Europe and a training game in South Africa in the countdown to the World Cup finals.

The All Whites have already confirmed a match with Mexico in Los Angeles on March 3, the only Fifa international window before the World Cup.

Herbert hailed the concept of having a home game to farewell the All Whites after the "outstanding support" for the team in the World Cup playoff victory over Bahrain in Wellington last November.

New Zealand Football chief executive Michael Glading said yesterday he hoped to attract a South American team here. It is understood Colombia could be a potential target. The match could be played on May 23 or 24, before the All Whites leave for Austria for a two-week training camp.

Glading said All Whites sports science consultant Ken-

ny McMillan, now based at English premier league club Aston Villa, will check out three potential training bases in Austria next week.

"It hasn't been confirmed, but we are talking with Serbia [who are also training in Austria] about a game, and one other."

The second game would be played elsewhere in Europe and there was a possibility of a third match, "although that will be a potential target. The home game," Glading said.

Herbert said the Austrian Alps would "mirror the altitude" the All Whites would play at in South Africa, where their games will be staged in

Rustenburg, Nelspruit and the Polokwane, all on the high veldt.

"It would be good to prepare in a completely different part of the world before travelling to South Africa about June 7 or 8, about a week before the start."

"That gives us the option of considering a training match, along the same lines [as the Italy game] before the Confederations Cup finals, although possibly behind closed doors," Herbert said. He believed that buildup would be the best the All Whites could expect, given they could not assemble their squad until after May 14, when the European club seasons are over.

Glading said the All Whites had "all but contracted" a training base at the Serengeti Golf and Wildlife Resort, between Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Herbert is also mindful of the need to keep his Australian and New Zealand-based players in trim, with the A-League due to end on March 20 and the NZFC to culminate in early April.

He is looking to take a squad, minus frontline players, to England-based stars to the Middle East or the United States for a two-week training camp to "fill the gap" between the end of the A-League and New Zealand Football Championship seasons and the World Cup campaign.

The squad would look to play "one A international, and another game against a club side," Glading said.

The NZFC chief said the Middle East could be a good option "after our positive experience in Dubai" preparing for the World Cup playoff.

But Herbert said the US "might have some value, too."

A number of All Whites, including senior midfielder Simon Elliott, play for Major League Soccer clubs in the US and Herbert said "a lot of New Zealand players have gone there through the college system."

He said he would also like to get two young England-based players, West Bromwich Albion striker Chris Wood and Ipswich Town defender Tommy Smith currently on a month's loan at Brentford released for the April camp. "But that will depend on their managers."

'It would be good to prepare in a completely different part of the world before travelling to South Africa.'

RICKI HERBERT