A record for loyalty unlikely to be broken

By Peter Owen

WHEN John Mitchell played in the Master Builders National Golf Tournament for the first time Elvis Presley had just married Priscilla, the Beatles album *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was top of the charts, and McDonalds' new Big Mac burger was selling for 45 cents.

In October, Mitchell, now 84 and preparing to call time on his long golf career, will line up in the event for the 55th time, setting a record for loyalty and longevity that is unlikely to ever be challenged, let alone broken.

As he prepares for this year's event – the 66th iteration of a contest for golfers involved in the building industry that began in Melbourne in 1959 – Mitchell recalls how he first became aware of a tournament that was to shape his life.

It was 1967 and Mitchell, a quantity surveyor, had been invited by a builder friend to play in that year's tournament at Newcastle.

Lynn Astley (NSW), David Bird (Gold Coast), Darren Imber (Qld) and Trevor Mowbray (Newcastle) before their round at Claremont, Tasmania, last year.

"It was a very good week of golf and I enjoyed the competition and the fellowship," said Mitchell who, as a young man, played golf on a Saturday morning, then opened the batting for Sandgate/Redcliffe's cricket team in the afternoon.

Mitchell played in the following year's national tournament on the Gold Coast, then the one in 1969 in Adelaide. Since then, he has missed only five – two in the Covid years, one when he was moving office, another when he was ill, and one when he was just too busy.

This year's tournament in Brisbane – to be played at Oxley, Carbrook and Nudgee from October 11 to 15– will be his last.

Mitchell, whose handicap over the years has blown out from five to 24, plans to terminate his membership of Keperra Golf Club, in Brisbane's north, in September, and retire from the game.

"It's getting too hard," he said. "Where once I was getting onto a par four in two shots it's now taking me four. I just can't hit the ball far enough."

He'll also retire from the Master Builders Golf Club, which has been hosting the national golf tournament since 1959, when teams from Victoria, NSW and South Australia first played for the M. R. Hornibrook Cup.

The tournament honoured Sir Manuel Richard Hornibrook, the acknowledged elder statesman of the Australian building industry, whose company built many significant engineering works in Australia in the mid-1900s.

The Master Builders National Golf Tournament is contested by teams from Victoria, NSW, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland, with regional teams representing the Gold Coast and Newcastle.

The five-day celebration of golf includes competition on the Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, dinners, social gatherings, a rest day, and plenty of time for catching up with old friends and swapping stories.

John Mitchell (left) shares a cart with Tasmania's John Erends at last year's Master Builders tournament in Hobart.

It generally attracts between 110 and 140 players, all of whom work, or worked, in the building industry, or in businesses involved with the industry. They play an individual stableford competition, with the winning team determined by averaging the scores of each team member over three rounds.

To promote fellowship, each group of four comprises a player from the host state, plus three others from different parts of the country. All players must have an official handicap.

Master Builders Golf Club national secretary John Duncalfe, who believes the tournament is probably the longest-running social golf event in the country, said registrations always filled quickly.

"We've got 29 from Tasmania already for this year's event," he said.

As for John Mitchell, he's preparing for life after golf by taking up bowls, which he describes as a much more dangerous sport than golf. "I've already had a couple of accidents," he said "I keep tripping over those gutters and falling down."