



Hugill brings Mona Vale up to par

Andy Hugill admits he was your typical “cocky” kid back when he got his first taste of the turf management game in the UK. Taking on an apprenticeship at Whitby Golf Club in the county of Yorkshire, Hugill thought he knew everything, especially seeing he was handy with the sticks.

He soon met his match, however, in the form of Whitby’s sagacious head greenkeeper Ian Lavelle who quickly sorted the young Hugill out and taught him a few honest truths about what he would need to make it in the profession. Lavelle’s words and work ethic obviously resonated with Hugill and more than 20 years later he can now claim to have reached the top of his profession, albeit on the other side of the world.

Having completed his apprenticeship at Whitby, Hugill departed England’s shores as a fearless 19-year-old and went to work at the Colony Club Gutenhof in Vienna, Austria where he would stay for five years. It was then that Hugill decided to move to Australia and was fortunate to catch a break at one of the country’s elite courses – New South Wales Golf Club. After just eight months he was appointed assistant superintendent under Gary Dempsey and would remain there for five years before moving across to Eastlake to take up his first superintendent posting.

In 2003, Hugill applied for the top job at Mona Vale Golf Club and was duly appointed. Hugill knew he was in for a challenge and the Board of the day presented him with a single goal – “Within five years bring the quality of the golf course to a level where it is generally recognised as the best conditioned on the northern beaches of Sydney”. Over six years later and with the 2009 AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award as proof, it is fair to say that Hugill has met and exceeded those expectations.

Since arriving from the UK in 1996, Andy Hugill has progressively made his mark on the turf management industry Down Under. However, it has been during his tenure as superintendent at Sydney’s Mona Vale Golf Club that Hugill, who was bestowed the 2009 AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award, has shone.



JOHN DEERE

FINE-TUNING OPERATIONS

When Hugill arrived at Mona Vale he found a tired course, a membership that was unhappy with its conditioning and declining numbers of public green fee players. Over the years Hugill and his course maintenance team have undertaken major drainage works, enhanced the playability of the kikuyu fairways, improved the management and presentation of the greens, as well as instituted a tee resurfacing programme. On top of this a new irrigation has been installed and extensive rehabilitation of the course’s sensitive wetlands undertaken.

Hugill’s first major concern was drainage. Being in a low-lying area subject to flooding, several holes used to become unplayable during periods of wet weather. Balls plugged in the fairways and were frequently lost in the waterlogged rough, while cart usage was severely restricted. The kikuyu fairways suffered and where water pooled for prolonged periods turf loss was common. Even in mid-summer it was sometimes necessary to play preferred lies. Hugill and his team set about rectifying drainage issues on three of the worst holes and for the first time employed a verti-drain across all fairways which had the desired effect.

As a result of drainage issues, the general health of the kikuyu fairways was also poor with severe fungal outbreaks common in

summer which would leave large patches of fairway without cover. This was one of Hugill’s prime KPIs set by the Board and they expected the condition of the fairways to improve substantially, at least to a level comparable with neighbouring courses.

Academics from the University of Sydney were sceptical of achieving an improvement and recommended conversion to couchgrass as a permanent solution. The club considered the cost of such a conversion, and the disruption to play, were too much to contemplate. To remedy the club’s issues Hugill instituted a yearly programme of scarifying and verti-draining. In addition, he amended the fertiliser and irrigation routines to improve the health of the turf.

While the fairways were a major focus for Hugill the greens have also come under close attention. The greens had always been of a good standard before Hugill arrived, but they lacked in general presentation. There were no formal collars separating the green from the surrounds of the fairway and kikuyu encroachment was becoming an issue. Following Hugill’s recommendation, all greens now have a 1.5m collar of Santa ana couch to act as a barrier to the kikuyu which also adds to the presentation of the green complexes.

Prior to Hugill starting the club had started a programme of converting its kikuyu tees

Since arriving at Mona Vale Golf Club in 2003, Andy Hugill has overseen a raft of changes which have improved the management, presentation and sustainability of the course

to couch, however, they struggled to thrive. Hugill's solution was to resurface the tees already converted to couch with washed turf instead of solid turf. The programme was extended to all tees and just one complex is left to be converted.

Perhaps the biggest change, which has resulted in a much more sustainable course, was the installation of a new irrigation system. The existing system was becoming a drain on resources, so much so that one qualified member of staff was assigned to continually repair the system. Potable water was also used to irrigate all greens and tees, at a cost of around \$30,000 per annum.

Hugill supervised the installation of a new irrigation system in the winter of 2007, with the project completed on time and on budget. The club secured a Federal Government Community Water Grant of \$250,000 to help fund the replacement system and Hugill was an integral member of the team that put the application together. The grant also included extensive rehabilitation of the course's wetlands and as a result of this work the club no longer relies on potable water. The new system saves the club a total of \$80,000 per annum.

As evidence of the significant enhancements made by Hugill and his crew, the course was chosen by the NSW Golf Association to host the 2005 NSW Champion of Champions tournament and the 2007 NSW Amateur Championships, while in 2008 Golf Australia chose Mona Vale as venue for the



Mona Vale course staff and members during wetland system rehabilitation works



2009 AGCSA Excellence in Golf Course Management Award winner Andy Hugill (left) with his Mona Vale crew

Australian Colts Teams Championships. Most recently it was selected to be one of the Sydney courses for the 2009 World Masters Games golf tournament to be held this October.

"The challenge we set Andy when he first joined Mona Vale was in the context of some well-established golf courses in the area which enjoy a reputation for high quality," says Mona Vale greens chairman Jim O'Ryan. "The directors of the Board considered the challenge a significant hurdle for Andy, one that privately we doubted he could achieve."

"Now, with six years behind us, we have reason to believe Andy has achieved that objective. The fairways are in the best playing condition in living memory and are now clearly the equal of any course on the northern beaches of Sydney.

"With the major tournaments we have held in recent times, the organisers have been very pleased with the selection of the course and at the completion of the events everyone has been lavish in their praise for the course and the efforts of Andy and his staff.

"What makes Andy's accomplishments more meritorious is that he has been constrained when it comes to capital expenditure. Like many golf clubs, Mona Vale does not enjoy large cash reserves and rather than buying new machines he has had to make do with second hand units on occasions. Fortunately Andy is a canny negotiator when it comes to purchasing."

OFF COURSE CHANGES

While the course has been Hugill's prime focus since, the all important HR side of a superintendent's role has also been high on his agenda. With many practices non-existent when he arrived at Mona Vale, Hugill has been able to institute:

- Formal position descriptions for each groundstaff role;
- Formal half-yearly reviews of staff performance;
- A straightforward bonus system for all staff based on performance reviews; and
- A more refined KPI format for the senior staff.

Outside the club, Hugill has also been heavily involved with the NSW Golf Course Superintendents Association. The immediate past president of the association, a post he held for two years (2006-2008), Hugill served a total of six years on the NSWGCSA committee before stepping down. In among all this he somehow found the time to get married and have three children as well! 🌱