

Turfing USA



The contrast between turf and desert mountain ranges makes for a picturesque scene at the Pete Dye designed Mountain Course Palm Springs

Earlier this year Gold Coast Burleigh superintendent Jeff Gambin accompanied a group of turf associated members on a trip to the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) tradeshow in San Diego. As well as attending this major event, the group visited a number of courses including Farm Links, a well-known research facility that continually trials new products.

SAN FRANCISCO TO PALM SPRINGS

After two days in San Francisco, which included a visit to one of the Simplot fertiliser companies, we travelled south to the Monterey Peninsula, which at the time was hosting the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

The tournament uses three of the area's famous courses - Pebble Beach, Spyglass Hill and Poppy Hills. Most of our time was spent inspecting the highly rated Pebble Beach. The *Poa annua* greens appeared waterlogged and soft with heel marks adorning the putting surfaces. The lush fairways were a mix of rye and *Poa* and the square tees were of a similar blend.

A kikuyu eradication program was implemented a number of years ago by using the chemical Drive. While areas of this undesirable grass were still evident, the program has reportedly been a great success.

Apart from the special seaside location, one of the highlights of the course was the plethora of indigenous trees which dominated the vegetative rough areas. The trees reminded us of our own coastal banksias and Moonah trees. There were also a number of eucalypts used as feature trees.

Our trip through the Monterey area continued past the Trent Jones Jnr/Tom Watson designed

Spanish Bay. This was one of the first courses in the USA to use a pure fescue/bentgrass fairway blend in an attempt to cater for the harsh California climate.

Pacific Grove, a special Scottish links style golf course, was next door. Famous architect Tom Doak in his book 'The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses' described the course as such; "The white sand and ice plant off the fairways are not quite the same as Scotland's heather and gorse but the layout does roll across the dunes much like a typical Scottish links course".

For US\$30 a round you can play Pacific Grove, which appeared great value compared with the US\$480 required for a round at Pebble Beach.

PALM SPRINGS

After departing the peninsula we travelled south along the coast before heading east to bypass Los Angeles before arriving in the desert oasis of Palm Springs.

The first golf course in the area was built during the 1940's, and with an unlimited underground water source the area grew rapidly. There are now, incredibly, more than 160 golf courses within a 30 square mile precinct with world renowned designers such as Norman, Nicklaus, Palmer and Dye all represented.

We reached our destination La Quinta Resort just on dark and the quality of oversown turf around the landscaped areas excited us all to what the two courses on site must be like.

We were invited to have dinner with Craig Shaffer (manager of Simplot Partners - Palm Springs) who updated us with oversowing varieties such as Caddyshack rye on fairways/tees with a mix of bent and rough bluegrass on greens.

Base grasses were predominantly Tifgreen on tees and fairways with Tifdwarf or Tifeagle on greens. They only have a dormant period of eight weeks but cannot afford to show clients brown turf. Most courses allow for an annual budget for seed of \$US200,000!

The following day, our fifth since arriving, began with a sunrise walk through the Pete Dye designed Mountain Course. La Quinta is one of the original watering holes in Palm Springs and has been developed into the premier golf/accommodation centre in the area.

The early morning light on the desert mountains was a real contrast compared to the quality of oversown turf.

We walked the back nine first, which commences with private homes along both sides of each hole.

Holes 14-17 had great backdrops of the desert mountain ranges, especially the 16th which boasted a 168-yard carry across rocky



An aerial view of the Palm Springs area shows the amazing number of courses in just a 30 square mile area

desert terrain from the back tee. Pete Dye has blended both courses beautifully into the desert landscape and the snowcapped mountain backdrops were breathtaking.

Another Dye course, PGA West, which is home of the annual PGA Desert Tour event, is also in the area.

Afterwards we visited Craig at his warehouse in Palm Springs and he gave everyone an amazing insight into golf course management in the area.

Some of the interesting points were;

- Over 3 million kg of seed is sold per annum;
- Oversowing rate used is 8kg/100m²;
- Kikuyu is controlled by the chemical 'Drive';
- Primo Maxx is available in 40l drums;
- Merit is sold as a soluble powder;
- A new formulation of haloxy fop (Fusilade II) is used;
- Kmag (soluble potassium/magnesium) is a widely used fertiliser;
- Gopher traps are used as a form of pest control;
- Heritage and Daconil are the most widely used fungicides.



The view from one of the elevated tees at the trial course, Farm Links

SAN DIEGO

From Palm Springs we headed south to San Diego where we would take in the GCSAA tradeshow. As expected it was huge, even the admission price was \$200. There was a healthy contingent of Australians there, while the AGCSA was officially represented at the conference through Steven Potts, Mark Couchman and John Neylan.

It was great catching up with the number of Aussies who now make their living as superintendents in places like the United Arab Emirates, China and the US. It was also interesting to meet superintendents from countries such as Singapore, Japan, Turkey and even Chile. Highlights of the tradeshow included:

- The new Toro 'quick-set' part circle sprinklers;
- Magnetic sole plate for Jacobsen reel mowers;
- Roller attachment to triplex greens mowers;
- Salt-tolerant paspalum varieties;
- Huge range of Bobcat accessories;
- Numerous lake aeration systems;
- Several hydraulic vehicle hoists;
- Washdown and chemical storage facilities.

ALABAMA

Following the four-day GCSAA conference, it was on the plane to head to our final destination Farm Links, a one-hour drive from Birmingham, Alabama.

Our accommodation was Parker Lodge, a spectacular traditional southern style lodge set in an idyllic lakeside location behind the 17th green. Among our group were two Argentines, a Chilean, a Singaporean and an Australian working in China.

Farm Links is a research facility owned and operated by Purcell Technologies Inc, the developers of Polyon controlled release fertilisers and pesticides.

The facility boasts a world-class 18-hole championship golf course and the working farm relies on a number of companies for support including Toro, Club Car, Bobcat, Syngenta and Simplot. The golf course is a Hurdzan/Fry design and was one of the best courses we saw during the visit.

The greens are a mixture of A1 and A4 bentgrasses while the fairways and tees were TifSport couch. During the height of summer, large fans are required to create air movement in the humid environment to reduce disease on the turf. Reverse cycle heating/cooling units are also used at various times throughout temperature extremes.

Zoysia grass is being trialled on a number of tees subject to shade problems, while broom sedges and love grasses dominate the native rough areas. Controlled burns are also used to encourage further native vegetation.

The 'Gabs' system, which is a plastic barrier surrounding each green to prevent couch encroachment, is used with great success throughout the golf course. The tee tops were oversown but at a much lighter rate than what we saw at Palm Springs.

The maintenance building was a very large, modern facility with an unbelievable amount of machinery (I counted 20 turf trucksters alone). Even with the size of the maintenance compound, there was still not enough room to fit all the equipment under cover.

For example, there were huge electrically driven fans that are used around the clock during the summer to help keep the bent greens cool. Even with the fans they still spray weekly for pythium due to the humidity.

Topdressing sand was under cover to help keep dry for their fortnightly dusting and de-thatching programs. They were trialling a new Bobcat utility type vehicle that had all manner of attachments such as a trenching chain, post hole digger, stump grinder and, of course, backhoe and bucket.

From there we were introduced to Farm Links' director of agronomy and applied research, Mark Langner, who briefed us on some of the turf varieties they will be planting into different areas of the course in spring.

We then had the chance to play the course which boasted some incredible elevated par 3 tees with very generous fairways, and large greens that had gentle movement throughout their surface.

Fairway hazards of rock lined drains and bunkers were easily seen from tees. It was surprising to see no course furniture on tees, except for painted rocks as tee markers.

The following day we were introduced to Tom Lacy, who was the construction and grow-in superintendent for Farm Links. He is now employed by Toro to conduct lectures about their latest technology and for Purcell when groups of visitors are in the lodge.

He invited us across to the Purcell laboratories. Upon arriving there we first walked into a huge storeroom that had hundreds of one tonne bags of differing analysis and was told about the quality control procedures.

He then took us through the laboratory explaining the testing procedures of each batch of fertiliser and conducted a demonstration of how they coat urea particles with Polymere instead of spraying.

We were then driven over to the Purcell movie theatre where Dr Jeff Higgins provided a presentation on the differences between coating of fertilisers, organic versus synthetic and some interesting results from some of his graduate students on the use of Primo and Heritage.

After lunch we headed back to the Farm Links maintenance facility where Tim put us through our paces with the prototype bunker raking and coring machines. We then turned our attention to irrigation equipment with my main interest being the satellite boxes that can convert hydraulic to electric and sprinklers that can be easily converted from part circle to full circle with an adjustment of nozzle angle.

On our last day at Farm Links we had breakfast with the president and chief executive of Purcell Technology, David Purcell. After breakfast we had time to go for one more walk/drive around Farm Links catching up with



The view from the 17th green back to the elevated tees at Farm Links

Mark Langner who had time to discuss his role as president of the Alabama chapter of the GCSAA.

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