

2004 Centenary Australian Open

The Open Heads Back Home



Having hosted the first Australian Open in 1904, the Centenary Australian Open returns to The Australian in November



The Australian superintendent Robert Ashes

The 2004 Centenary Australian Open will be played out at The Australian Golf Club in Sydney, home to superintendent Robert Ashes for the past 22 years. ATM editor Brett Robinson heads north of the border in the lead up to what will be Ashes' fourth Open and discovers that this year's event will be akin to a great unveiling for Australia's oldest club.

Robert Ashes likes to think of this year's Centenary Australian Open as an unveiling rather than a test. Over the past five years the long-time superintendent at The Australian Golf Club has instituted a raft of changes to the country's oldest club, which despite being given a thorough working over by the club's 1100 members, have yet to face the ultimate challenge in hosting the game's upper echelon.

Standing before the likes of Allenby and Appleby lays a new-look course boasting 18 new greens, six new championship tees to test the tactics and a bevy of remodelled bunkers designed to swallow the hopes of any aspiring Open champion.

Having been the venue of the very first Open in 1904, it is fitting The Australian should now play host to the Centenary Open, and if past history is any guide then over the four days

starting 25 November another unique chapter is set to be penned in the annals of the tournament's history.

Through the ages

While Peter Lonard secured last year's Open on the untried greens at Moonah Links, the 2004 Open heads back to one of Australia's grand old clubs, a venue which has hosted the Open 15 times and has witnessed some of the event's major milestones.

The first Open chapter was entered back in September 1904 - The Australian was then located at Botany - when the Honourable Michael Scott became the inaugural recipient of the Stonehaven Cup. The Victorian amateur triumphed with a four round score of 315.



The very first Australian Open champion, the Honourable Michael Scott. Picture: Royal Sydney Golf Club

After travelling to Royal Melbourne and Royal Sydney, the Open returned to The Australian in 1908 where Tasmanian amateur C. Pearce won with 311.

Following World War I, the Open headed back to The Australian in 1920 where New South Welshman Joe Kirkwood became the first Open champion to break 300 with a winning total of 290, 12 shots better than the previous record score of 302 set by Victorian amateur Ivo Whitton in 1913.

Incidentally, Kirkwood's record would stand for a further 14 years until Sydneysider Bill Bolger carded a 283 up the road at Royal Sydney (which at the time was home to a budding young curator named Rupert Walkerden) and in doing so beat Gene Sarazen by three shots.

Another New South Welshman Fred Popplewell won the 1925 Open before champion amateur Whitton created a unique slice of Open history by securing the 1931 title. Whitton, who in 1912 had become the Open's youngest champion (a record that remained until Aaron Baddeley won at Royal Sydney in 1999) became the first player to win the Open in three separate decades, securing his fifth title with the 1931 win.

Victorian G.W Naismith added his name to the Open honours board by winning the 1937 Open, E.J Cremin shot 287 to win the 1949 Open, while a decade later Kel Nagle, Australia's Centenary British Open champion, won what would be his only Australian Open.

After a break of 16 years, the Open teed up again at The Australian in 1975 and remained there for the next four years. It proved to be a

golden period with icon Jack Nicklaus establishing what would become a special relationship with the club.

With a score of 279, Nicklaus, who had won his first Open title in 1964 after shooting a 67 in a playoff against Bruce Devlin at The Lakes, won his fourth Open title in 1975 and backed that up the following year with his fifth victory.

In 1977, David Graham won his first and only Australian Open, before Nicklaus returned in 1978 to win the last of his six Open titles.

Four years later Bob Shearer won his first Open, the same year that a young man by the name of Robert Ashes joined the crew as assistant superintendent.

In 1990, American John Morse and Craig Parry fought out what was then only the fifth playoff in Open history. Both finished with 283 (Morse closed with a round of 69 and Parry a 72) before Morse secured the title at the first hole of a sudden-death playoff.

Finishing in a tie for third that year was Greg Norman who claimed the undoubted highlight of the four days when he scored a unique albatross on the par 5, 5th. Having crushed his drive left of centre, Norman proceeded to hole his 3-wood second shot, a distance of over 250m. A special bronze plaque now marks the exact spot where Norman hit that sweet shot.

The most recent Open at The Australian was in 1996 and was special for two main reasons.

The tournament marked the first appearance in Australia of a budding professional by the name of Eldrick Woods. Tiger, who had turned professional just three months earlier, came to The Australian as the next big thing in golf, boasting three US Amateur titles.



Looking towards the 16th green at The Australian. The 16th has been lengthened by 43 metres with the construction of a new championship tee

The Australian sorted Woods out however. He scraped in under the cut after opening rounds of 79 and 72, before finishing with 71 and 70 to tie for fifth, 12 shots adrift of the winner.

And who was champion that year? Well, barring a sensational comeback, it was most likely the last time The Shark will ever lift the Stonehaven Cup. With rounds of 67, 73, 71 and 69, Norman compiled the biggest winning margin of his five Open victories, finishing eight shots ahead of Wayne Grady and making it two in a row after winning the previous year at Kingston Heath.

A seasoned pro

The 2004 tournament will be Ashes' fourth Australian Open, a milestone which comes just weeks after he celebrates his 49th birthday. Not bad for someone who three decades earlier chucked in an architecture degree at the University of New South Wales, took a fill-in job at a local golf course while deciding what career to take, and now finds himself at the top of the superintendent profession.

Ashes' first Open was in 1982, the same year he joined The Australian as assistant superintendent after spending six years at Avondale Golf Club.

He was just 18 months into the job when he was promoted to superintendent, a position the father of three is likely to hold on to for a while yet.

There have been plenty of Open memories for Ashes, thankfully for all the right reasons, and come November he is looking to add yet another successful tournament to an already long and distinguished career.

"The first Open was always a buzz, being involved in the big time," recalls Ashes. "As far as tournaments go they have all been good and we haven't suffered any controversy. In each case the course has come up well and the pros have played their game and shot the scores.

"It's definitely a thrill and an honour to be preparing the course for the Centenary Open. Ever since the club put its hand up to host it, I've been looking forward to it. But it's something you can't do on your own. I'm only a cog in the machine here. It's the staff, it's management and all those involved in putting the tournament together.

"I enjoy the pressure. I think with any tournament you're name is on the rack but to put it in perspective it's just another weekend. You've got to keep it in perspective but we are certainly striving to do the best possible job and show the world what we can do and give the club something to be proud of.

"The thing is that you don't want to make it too hard for yourself and try and achieve the impossible. You've got to budget for the worse case scenario and be prepared for the worse possible conditions. Everything else is a bonus.

"Experience does play a part and the more you do it the better you are. But at the end of the day you've got to be confident of the product and the people that are producing it. You've got to be confident that your turf is in good shape, and that doesn't happen by a fluke."

The great unveiling

In many ways this Open will be an unveiling of sorts for Ashes and The Australian.

Since the Open last visited Rosebery, Ashes has overseen some major improvements to the course, the most extensive set of works undertaken since the whole course was redesigned in the mid 1970s by the Nicklaus company and in cooperation with current patron Kerry Packer.

Following extensive trials of 10 different bentgrass varieties, the decision was made to convert all greens and the practice putter to the new superfine Penn-A1 creeping bentgrass. In doing so, it became one of the first Australian clubs along with Concord to make a full-scale conversion to the new variety.

The old Penncross/*Poa* greens were ripped up and resurfaced in 1999, while the immediate surrounds were regrassed with Santa ana and the landforms were tied in better to the greens. While there was no major reshaping of the greens, some gradients were softened to provide a greater choice for pin placements.



Poa annua control the old fashioned and reliable way

Five years down the track and Ashes says he is delighted with the way the new greens are maturing despite the additional management challenges they have thrown his way.

"The Penn-A1 does require vigilance to maintain, but it delivers a great putting surface," says Ashes. "We are very happy with the choice. The greens are strong in summer and maintain very good density over winter. We still have issues with wintergrass, but we can keep them (the greens) clean."

Poa control, along with thatch management, has been one of the major challenges to test Ashes in the upkeep of the new greens.

"Wintergrass management is a big issue at the moment and will continue to be so," says Ashes.

"We are finding over the years, long years of managing wintergrass, we may have developed resistance where other clubs haven't, but we have to be creative in our solution finding. Not everything works as per the recipe or the advertised effectiveness of old and new products. We all desire a silver bullet, but realistically you have limited resources with commitment being your greatest asset.

"Wintergrass is always a problem and was one of the reasons why we replaced the greens



Early morning mist creates an eerie scene looking across the 11th green at The Australian

initially, to introduce a stronger bentgrass more capable of resisting it. But that's not the only way to keep it out. There's a whole management regime that has to go with it.

"We are asking so much more of our greens nowadays than say 10-15 years ago. Everyone wants them at 11 feet every day of the week. The old grasses can't sustain that and the new grasses can sustain it for periods but they aren't bullet-proof.

"I think that expectations have forced the bar up extremely high and as turf managers it is difficult to maintain that week in, week out through the whole year. Members don't accept troughs and they even see renovations as an affront to their week rather than embrace it because it gives the turfgrass sustainability."

For Ashes, the most effective weapon in controlling *Poa* has been handweeding and when ATM visited The Australian in mid August Ashes had teams out scouring the greens daily.

Thatch management has also been an issue with the new greens and Ashes has developed a regular spiking and dusting program.

"We have moved away from high impact renovations and incorporated low impact renovations like dusting and spiking," says Ashes. "This means there is less surface disruption for *Poa* to get in and effective aeration and thatch control. The golfers tend to enjoy it more, even though it's more often."

Changing cultural practices is something not unfamiliar to Ashes who over the past 22 years at The Australian has had to move with the times.

"The way I have managed the course has changed mostly to reflect the progress of technology," he says.

"You sift the wheat from the chaff with all this new technology and try to get to the basics. I never deviate too far from the basics of greenkeeping – good fertility, good aeration and picking the right grass for the right spot. The fundamentals haven't changed.

"There are some great new products on the market but there aren't too many silver bullets. Good management of your surfaces is the key to it. You step aside from the basics at your peril.

"The thing that's probably helped me most over my career is the regular dusting of greens, clever aeration and different renovation machines and techniques. The next thing would be the new species of grasses. Mowers are still mowers, but dusting greens is out there for me. I've been using that for thatch control and firmer greens for a long time, and the new bents demand it."

A more sustainable product

At the same time as resurfacing the greens in 1999, Ashes and his staff, along with the Nicklaus designer and shaper, reformed all greenside bunkers. The quality of sand was improved, while access and maintenance capabilities were enhanced.

In 2002 it was decided to bring the fairway bunkers into line with the greenside bunkers. Again the works centred on making the bunkers more visible and more of a hazard off the tee and improving the consistency of the sand.

Ashes decided on using a crushed sandstone, which apart from boasting excellent colour (a brilliant white) had superb compacting qualities that resisted ball plugging and was intrinsically very manageable.

"I guess you can say we modernised the bunkers," says Ashes. "I think we have introduced consistency. They are in better shape and don't require as intense management. The banks are easier to maintain and we have cut down manual Flymo work quite drastically."

During 2002 the fairways - a mix of different couchgrasses - were overplanted (stolonised) with Santa ana. In two years Ashes says the Santa ana has done extremely well and is looking forward to the next few years when the full benefits will be realised.

Six new tee areas have also been constructed over the past six years, all of which will be utilised during the Open, while all the championship tees and a number of the member tees were resurfaced with Santa ana.

The new tees have added a total of 152m to the course's length with the 12th tee being the final major work before the tournament. Twenty-six metres has been added to the 2nd and 4th (both par 3s), the par 5 5th has been extended 25m, and the par 4 9th has an extra 17m. The par 4 12th is 15m longer while the par 4 16th plays 43m longer.

While work to the course itself has finished for the time being, Ashes says there are still plenty of future projects in the pipeline for The Australian.

Apart from the continued sustainability of the club's turf systems, Ashes says other issues

like water management and environmental management will be big topics for the club over the next five years. Landscaping and tree management will also be a focal point. Ashes also adds risk management to that list and in preparation for the Open has had the tree surgeons in removing dead branches.

While the improvements made over the past five years will ultimately add to the Open spectacle come November, Ashes says they were intended to deliver a better product for the club's members.

"Overall, I think we have a better product which in some respects is easier to manage," says Ashes. "It has given the members a more sustainable, high quality product. The pros? They will get the same - a consistent product."

Another chapter begins

So how will the pros negotiate the new-look course? Of most interest to Ashes is how they will handle the new championship tees.

The 1st, currently a par 5, will be turned into a challenging opening par 4, while the par 3 2nd is now 194m thanks to the new championship tee. Holes 3, 4, 5 and 7 have traditionally played a key role in the aspirations of many previous tournament champions and will do so again.

The closing four holes set up beautifully – the par 3 15th, par 4 16th, par 4 17th and par 5 18th. The 15th boasts a well guarded green while the new tee on 16 has added 43m to what was already the hardest hole on the course.

"I have absolutely no idea what they will shoot," laughs Ashes. "But The Australian has traditionally been a good test of golf."

"With the new tees we've added around 152m, which while not sounding like a lot, will make that extra difference and I will be really interested to see how the pros will handle them."

"Along with the new greens they will add a bit more spice and intrigue, but it really comes



Looking back down the 16th from behind the green



The 18th green is flanked by water to the right and massive bunkers to the left



Rob Ashes and AGU chief executive Colin Phillips discuss tactics for the Australian Open

back to weather conditions. If there are some bad days they will have some problems.

"The Australian demands accuracy around the greens and recovery shots can be very difficult. The fairways are generous and off the tee it's a good fun course, but it's the next shot that counts. The bunkers are deep and if they have a short pin the course can come up and bite you real quick."

With plenty of talk these days surrounding the effects technology is having on the game, Ashes is unconcerned about the prospect of the pros carving up his grand old lady.

"I think a lot of it is linked to weather conditions," he says. "There's no reason with the calibre of these players why they can't belt the hell out of The Australian, but if it blows they probably won't."

"Conditions at that time of year can be varied. I'd like to see it dry and windy – a couple of nor-easters with a southerly thrown in, and one still day."

With only weeks remaining until the biggest tournament in Australia, Ashes is confident with the state of the course, a feeling backed up by AGCSATech manager John Neylan and Australian Golf Union chief executive Colin Phillips who

have conducted a number of course inspections in the lead-up to the tournament.

With the course put to bed over winter in top condition, all that remains for Ashes, his assistant David Honeysett and complement of 21 staff to do is tune the surfaces to tournament conditions.

"I'm feeling very happy where we are at," says Ashes. "The course has come through winter very well. Winter was cold and dry and we had a lot of frosts which hit a few fairways."

"We've got issues such as wintergrass but that won't affect the tournament one iota. Obviously it affects our local play and that's really the only negative at this stage."

"The biggest thing for tournament preparations is that, touch wood, it's up to us not to do anything stupid and make sure we are careful with everything we do because the closer you get to the event the less margin for error you have."

"We'll just keep an eye on the greens and tune those surfaces to the desired speeds. Everything else should follow."

"There's definitely no need to trick up the greens. I will be presenting the playing surfaces in their best condition, no tricks! Besides, we've

got clear guidelines from the AGU and we intend to meet those."

"The older courses, as we are classified, are at the mercy of the distance the golfer hits the ball and as turf managers can only present the course in as good a condition as resources and weather allows, we should resist calls to trick the course up to reduce scoring."

"People are attracted by good shot making and seeing players rewarded for good play. The course should take a backseat role and I'm confident it will stand up to them."

"If they shot great scores it won't be because the course is in bad nick; in fact it's a compliment if they are sinking the putts and the ball is rolling true because you have done your job." ❏

