

BY DANIEL G. S. COOK

The Ohio State Program has seen numerous Australian greenkeepers work at some of America's finest golf courses, but for Daniel Cook it ultimately led to his employment at one of the world's most talked about clubs - Augusta National. For the past two years Cook has been part of the Augusta inner sanctum but said goodbye recently in order to come home and fill the vacant superintendent position at Elanora Country Club in Sydney. Cook, who was the first Australian to be part of the management team at Augusta, gives ATM an exclusive look inside the US Masters venue to see how it ticks from a turf management perspective.

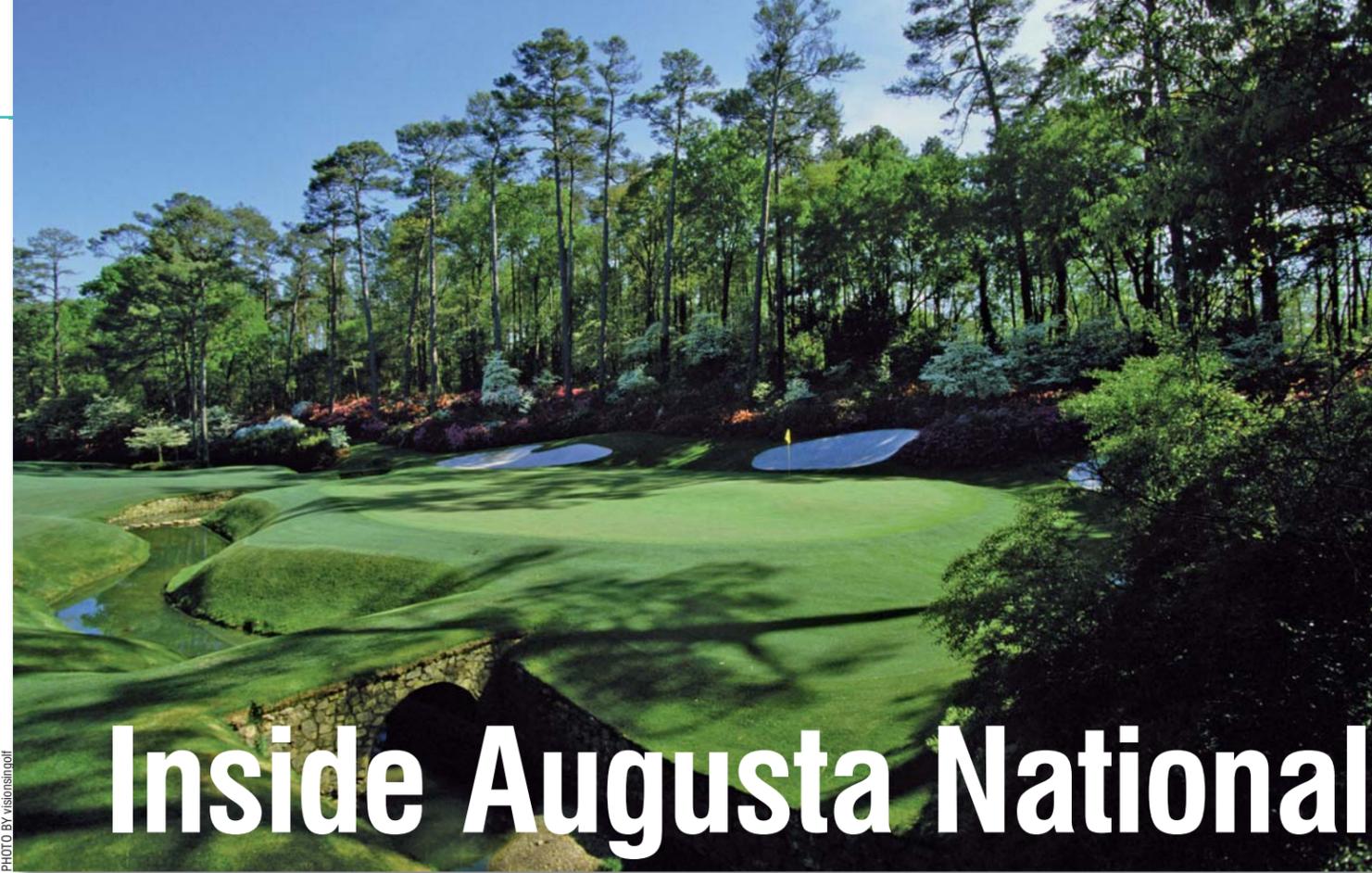


PHOTO BY VISIONSHOPI

Inside Augusta National

The striking 13th green and surrounds of Augusta National Golf Club. Australian Daniel Cook was privileged to work at the club for the past two years and was given the opportunity to manage the back nine greens for the 2007 US Masters

My very first memory of Augusta National Golf Club was watching Greg Norman blow a six shot lead on the back nine to lose the 1996 US Masters to Nick Faldo. While the Shark's demise was hard to watch I couldn't help but notice the immaculate presentation of the golf course. It seemed like a mythical fantasy land that epitomised perfection and for a young greenkeeper starting out in the industry it instantly became 'the' course that I had to visit.

That same year I had started as a groundsman at Mona Vale Golf Club in Sydney, a position which I held for a year before being offered an apprenticeship at Monash Country Club. After finishing my qualifications and staying on there, I was contacted by Greg Armstrong from The Australian Golfing Fellowship of Rotarians. He was involved with

issuing a scholarship for an Australian qualified greenkeeper to attend the Ohio State Program in the United States.

Snapping up the opportunity, my first placement was at Kingsmill Golf Resort and Spa in Williamsburg, Virginia, in the heart of the 'transition' zone. From there I headed south to The Polo Club of Boca Raton in West Palm Beach, Florida which was undergoing a \$7 million reconstruction. I arrived as assistant superintendent and left as superintendent.

My next stop was Oak Hill Country Club in Rochester, NY which at the time was gearing up to host the 85th US PGA Championships. While there I worked under director of golf Paul Latshaw Jnr. and superintendent Tom Bailey IV. My stay here was to achieve two major goals - complete a sector on a cool-season course and work a Major.

The Donald Ross design was flawless and with Latshaw Jnr. at the helm it was ranked that year alongside Augusta National for course conditioning. Again I kept hearing and thinking of that fantasy land Augusta National that every one compares themselves too.

Preparation for the PGA had started about three years out with the installation of a new irrigation system and total bunker renovation. Working for Latshaw Jnr. was one of the most demanding yet rewarding experiences of my life. Notching up 100-plus hours a week with only one day off in eight months leading up to the tournament was a true test.

The week of the tournament was quite remarkable with the maintenance crew swelling to 150. Some of the amazing aspects of the week included push mowing the six inch (150mm) rough inside the ropes with 20 rotary

mowers so as not to lay down any rough. The rough was fluffed daily from tee to green and we walk mowed approaches up to 80 metres out from the greens.

With my US visa about to expire, I returned Down Under and found employment under Peter Watts at Terrey Hills Country Club. Working at a championship course in Australia was great and I was involved with all aspect of course management.

I had not planned to move on until I was contacted out of the blue by Nelson Caron who had taken a new assistant position at The Honors Course in Ooltewah, Tennessee. He needed a wing man and was willing to help me through the difficult visa process.

I was excited to work on another top 100 course and it offered me a chance to work on zoysia fairways and Pennncross greens. Superintendent David Stone is one of the guru's of zoysia and looks after the Pete Dye design in perfect harmony with its natural setting.

The major event of their calendar year was the US Mid-Amateur Championships. I was responsible for managing the greens for this event, being primarily in charge of the back nine as well as coaching one of the interns preparing the front nine.

THE DREAM BECOMES REALITY

Following the tournament David arranged for me to go on a tour of Augusta National Golf Club to fulfil my long-held dream. I toured the property with director of golf Marsh Benson and although it was the middle of summer the course blew my mind. It was an amazing

experience and right then I vowed I would have to return here at some point in my career.

Not long after I was sitting down with David and I asked him where he thought my next career move should be. His recommendation was immediate - Augusta National. He had continually heard me talk about Augusta after my return from the tour and as luck would have it through his network of contacts he put me in touch with Augusta National superintendent Brad Owen to start the process rolling.

Not surprisingly the process to become part of the inner sanctum at Augusta was an exercise in patience. All prospective staff members are put through a barrage of interviews and tests to ensure they are suitable. The first part of the process involved a phone interview with Brad and Augusta HR manager Sean Moore. They asked me a variety of questions ranging from general queries about my interests through to specific agronomic questions and scenarios. I also had to undertake a PI test (personal index) and once I had successfully applied for my visa (an expensive exercise) I then had to undergo a drug test upon arrival.

With all the HR criteria met, which included the signing of a confidentiality agreement whereby I am not allowed to divulge certain aspects of the club's make-up and agronomic operations for a period of 10 years, I was welcomed to Augusta. I was ready to fulfil a dream I had held for nearly a decade.

A YEAR IN THE LIFE

To give you an overview of operations I will try to go through a year in the life of an employee at Augusta National. The main stages are membership play, the US Masters, transition, the summer and overseeding.

The course is open to membership play from October through May. This is the playing season and the focus at this time is to prepare the course day-to-day as best we can. During these months any areas that are still not as



strong as they need to be after overseeding are reseeded until an acceptable stand of ryegrass is achieved.

The turf species include a pure stand of A1 bentgrass on the greens with 419 couch and Celebration couch (a new shade-tolerant variety available in the US) on the fairways, tees and second cut which are overseeded for the playing season with annual ryegrass.

Maintenance practices at Augusta are designed to be site-specific, impact play as little as possible with most activity happening early before membership play. Morning maintenance practices comprise mowing greens, margins, clean ups, tees, raking greenside and fairway bunkers, course set up, watering (if required), debris blowing and fairway mowing (if required). Also, all ranges are prepared before play.

During the middle of the day a lot of detail work is carried out to have little or no impact on play with smaller equipment used to create less noise. The afternoon maintenance can include mowing fairways and second cut (there is no rough at Augusta). This is to avoid clippings and disruption of the majority of the day's play.

The greens at Augusta are a sight to behold. Pure is too less a word. Generally they are big in size (I can't divulge their exact measurements) but their undulations are quite remarkable and some have massive false fronts. Excessive movement means that poor positional play is punished. Jack Nicklaus, who holds the record for the most Masters victories (six), once said that if you put a 10-handicap golfer in the middle of every green in regulation they still wouldn't break 90!

MAJOR COUNTDOWN

As the season goes on, striving for perfection continues as the Masters tournament quickly approaches. Although attention to detail is always a high focus point this becomes more important the closer we get to April.

As the tournament approaches all maintenance practices intensify. The mowing regime is increased to produce the most pure ryegrass and bent surfaces possible. Any

The 12th at Augusta National rates as one of the best and most difficult par 3s in world golf



PHOTO COURTESY OF SETH JONES, GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT MAGAZINE, GCSAA

The 10th at Augusta National which up until 1935 was actually the course's opening hole

all staff work longer hours than usual and there are no days off during this push. A huge number of volunteers are added to the staff for the tournament while the equipment fleet can double and even triple in some areas as extra machinery is brought in.

As the tournament approaches water management becomes very important. The greens go to hand watering only 60 days out. Also leading into the tournament tissue testing of the greens is carried out on a fortnightly basis. This is done on site by an Augusta National employee and gives us a chance to watch the greens lean down in a controlled manner.

While the turf is finetuned for its big date, there is also the flurry of activity in and around the course. The television towers and spectator grandstands are continually being erected and the main spectator entrances are prepared for the masses and security checkpoints moved into place. During this time the nursery crew responsible for all the trees, shrubs and azaleas (there are about 1600 azaleas from tee to green on the 13th hole alone) are also flat out to make their areas complement the perfect turf.

The weekend before the practice rounds, the ropes and stakes go up to outline the 'in-play' and 'spectator' areas. At this time the real tournament feeling sets in and the focus for the maintenance team narrows in on the in-play areas. The acreage is greatly reduced and with resources growing with the presence



PHOTO COURTESY OF SETH JONES, GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT MAGAZINE, GCSAA

of the volunteers and extra equipment we can zone in on all the smallest details. No details are too small.

SHOW TIME

When the practice rounds start there are a lot of strange feelings that go through you. You're excited to see the all the top players in the world play the course; tense as the greens start to get extremely dry and firm in perfect tournament condition; and upset to see all your hard work in the spectator areas being destroyed by foot traffic.

There is also another feeling which is hard to describe, but I will try to explain it. There are never too many people on the property at Augusta during the playing season. Now it is strange to see tens of thousands walking around. It feels like they are invading your own piece of paradise. I guess it's like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in a way – all these people are lucky enough to have a golden ticket for one week of the year, other than that it is closed to the outside world.

Being part of the assistant team under Brad, I was fortunate enough to be entrusted with looking after the back nine greens for the duration of the 2007 Masters. Words can't describe how proud I felt when I was told I was being given this role. The feeling was one of approval and trust. It was also a major test of my abilities to see whether I could handle the pressure. I had done so at the US Mid-Amateur but this was the Masters.

This year it was dry and warm heading into the Masters so we had a great dry down. The greens were monitored all day leading up to the event with syringing where required. Most of the hand watering took place at night to make the greens as good as they could be for morning play.

The fairways and second cut were also extensively hand watered to keep as firm and fast as possible without losing colour. We also carried out routine checks for disease outbreaks, constantly checked the mowers for quality of cut, as well as repaired and dusted ball marks and checked old plugs.

This year's tournament was one of the toughest in recent history and it was also one of the driest. We dodged some pop up showers during the practice rounds and enjoyed producing firm fast playing conditions.

The weather though was much colder than normal. We had two frost delays on Saturday and Sunday morning of the tournament and if the cold was not enough the wind blew too. Fortunately we didn't have to worry too much about plant health as far as water was concerned but we did always have to consider playability and receptiveness. We didn't want good shots to be punished.

It was an amazing experience to take greens that far and not go over the edge. The pressure was immense and anything less than perfect was unacceptable. It was an awesome experience and I am definitely one of a privileged few.

SEASON'S END

As the tournament passes Augusta is open for one month after the event for membership play. ▶

During this time we try to repair all tournament damage. The TV towers and observation stands are removed for another year to return the course to pre-tournament condition.

The season comes to a close in May (the start of the summer) and this is when all the renovations begin. The greens are cored continuously throughout the summer and topdressed where possible. Shade tents and fans are put up on the greens where required and the cooling systems in the greens get a good work out to get the bentgrass through the tough stretch of hot, humid weather. Disease pressures are very high with pythium being at the top of the list.

All disruptive construction and renovation practices happen in the summer. Some turf work is done to reverse any spectator damage during the tournament. Agronomic focuses are on the continued health of the bentgrass and to promote the couch to be as healthy as possible. A pre-emergent programme comes into affect now and any weed control is also carried out.

As the summer rolls on, thoughts go to the September overseed. All the work that went into producing healthy couch is quickly scalped down. The process takes seven to 10 days depending on the weather conditions. Shortly after the overseed a tinge of green appears and another growing/golfing season at Augusta National is born.

A SAD DAY

I have huge respect for Marsh Benson (senior director) and superintendent Brad Owen for the responsibility they gave me and the valuable experience I had while I was at Augusta National Golf Club.

Brad has been at Augusta for 20 years and has worked his way up to superintendent after starting out many years ago as a mere intern. He is a fine detail sort of guy who lets nothing get past him and believes there is no such thing as "it can't be done".

I will take many things away from my time at Augusta. While the agronomics were second to none, the most important lesson I learnt was

that it's the small things that count. Attention to detail is what separates the excellent from the exceptional. Sometimes these can be so small that you don't even recognise them. I also learnt that planning is the cornerstone of success.

Beyond Augusta National I was given the opportunity to interview at Elanora Country Club for the superintendent position. The thought of returning to the northern beaches of Sydney where I had grown up and started my career was great. Fortunately I was successful with my application and on 20 August I started my new posting.

It was a sad day to walk out of Augusta National for the last time. It was very emotional to return my keys and credentials and know that I didn't have access to the amazing facility that is Augusta National. I will always smile as I embark on my challenging new role back in Australia with the experiences at Augusta strongly in my memory. The road to Augusta National and beyond has been the experience of a life time. 🙏