

Ben Balderson

Sea Island Resort

Ohio University Turf Management Intern Program



As I sat at the international departures lounge in Brisbane Airport I contemplated what was ahead. After three months of planning, emails back and forth, Visa applications and savings, here I was about to start the biggest adventure of my life. A greenkeeper from Toowoomba, Queensland in six flights and 36 hours travelling time – I would be landing in Georgia and heading to the renowned Sea Island Resort to start my 12-month internship.

How did I get so lucky to receive this massive career opportunity? It has not been just luck I tell myself, it has been three years of learning the trade, finishing my greenkeeping apprenticeship to get this opportunity. But I am grateful that I met Mike O’Keefe from the internship Ohio University International Internship Program and the boon of being the recipient for the John Hood AGFR Memorial Scholarship from the Australian Golfing Fellowship of Rotarians. This made the trip a reality and provided funds for my airfares, Visas etc – which I am so thankful for.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

First stop was Columbus, Ohio State University, where I met up with Internship coordinator Mike O’Keefe again for the orientation to the program. Mike was extremely generous with his time and showed me around the University which was like a town in itself.

A highlight was the Ohio Stadium which is on the Ohio State University campus and home venue of Ohio State Buckeyes. It is the largest stadium by capacity in the state of Ohio and the fourth largest football stadium in the United States.

And here is a little grass tidbit from this greenkeeper. In 1970 – the natural grass field was removed and AstroTurf was installed. In 1990 (took 20 years) natural grass made its return to the “Horseshoe” a special grass called “Prescription Athletic Turf”.

After completing my orientation at Ohio, I was then on to my next flight to Atlanta, then Savannah to the place I will be calling home for the next 12 months.



At Ohio State University Stadium

Big Southern Welcome

36 hours and six flights since leaving Brisbane, I arrived in Savannah where Sea Island’s Pamela collected me from the airport. She was the epitome of Southern hospitality and the hour’s drive to Sea Island went so quickly as she filled me in with the happenings of the resort.

After a few days rest, I met Sea Island Golf Resort’s director Berry Collett and Superintendent Ryan Cox. They took me of a tour of the pristine golf course which was in full swing in preparation for the PGA event McGladrey Classic which was just over one week away.

McGLADREY CLASSIC

When I arrived at Sea Island Resort it was in full competition preparation mode getting the course ready for the PGA McGladrey Classic. All my reading about this event and watching on television was nothing in comparison to being there, amongst it – Just one week and I was already so proud to be part of this team and this golf resort.

I was fortunate to have seven fellow Ohio Turf Management interns with me. Two that had been at the golf course for 18 months and stayed on to help with the tournament and five others who flew in to volunteer their time to help and gain valuable experience being involved in this large-scale event.

I learnt that a few items had been tweaked for this year's event. The bunkers had just been reconditioned by putting sharper and steeper edges in place. We also added intermediate cut of rough to the fairways as well as tweaking some of the fairway widths by narrowing or expanding.

I was also quickly learning about the challenges that the huge green keeping team face in lead up the event. But the organisation and management was just amazing. I arrived at the end of October just a week out from the event but prep started in June. From conditioning the greens, verticut and top dress more often. This helps firm the greens and reduce the grains making the conditions more difficult. The last month in prep for the Tour event there is an intensive water management – with hand watering, overhead sprinklers and rolling the greens also picks up.

In preparation for the event we started at 4am (in the dark) and they would light these giant 25m LED television billboards which were set up for the tournament and it would light the whole golf course. During the tournament I was fortunate to be paired with the PGA tour agronomist checking greens and moisture and stump readings each morning and afternoon.

The tournament itself was fantastic to watch and seeing the best in the world on “our” golf course. Tommy Gainey came from seven shots behind to score a win of Jim Furyk. Davis Love III (who is based at Sea Island) just missed out on shooting just one back on 60.

A highlight for me was seeing one of my all time favourites Veejay Singh in action and Jim Furyk also said to me “the greens were in great shape” which of course I could not take credit for but felt so proud of being part of this team that got the Seaside golf course ready for this renowned event.



Life at Sea Island Resort

After the tournament, my fellow interns moved on to their next positions or back home. I was based in a house on Sea Island Resort, for now by myself but may have a fellow intern in summer. Being the only intern my roles on the Seaside golf course have been varied and I am continually learning and expanding my skills. Thanks to my four years of golf course and sports oval experience the management were able to give me higher level tasks.

I am constantly impressed by the professionalism of the management of the course. I work with a large number of Mexicans and they keep me entertained with their jokes.

The overseeding (putting winter grass over the summer grass) was a fantastic thing to learn and be part of the preparation of. At the moment I am looking after the main green as well as spraying.

Other jobs include mowing fairways. Which is done every second day in winter and every day in summer. Mowing tees and greens.

The wildlife on Sea Island resort is amazing and diverse. There are alligators, squirrels, chipmunks, dolphins, turtles and dolphins.



Being from Australia, I am quite a novelty here on the Island. With everyone wanting to listen to my accent. One of the directors asked me to hop in his cart to head over to the next fairway. I asked was there something wrong. He replied, "No, I just want to listen to you talk" he replied. I am making friends and everyone has been extremely welcoming. Christmas was difficult being away from my family. But I spent it and Thanksgiving (what a fantastic holiday) with new friends I have met at Sea Island Resort. I have also joined a rugby team.

My first three months at Sea Island Resort has been filled with so many wonderful moments. From being involved in the PGA tournament, to learning new turf management skills and expanding my own, and learning about a new culture. I am so thankful for this and am looking forward to what the next months ahead bring.



From left: Michal Hardin (1st Assistant Plantation Golf Course), Ryan Cox (superintendent), Berry Collett (director of golf maintenance), myself, Brandon Richie (1st Assistant Seaside Golf Course).

