



Author Luke Partridge

Flying in over the Pacific Ocean I wasn't quite sure what to expect out of The Ohio Program. I had been warned that my internship at Oakmont Country Club in Pennsylvania was not going to be a walk in the park, but perhaps nothing could have prepared me for what was to come.

Oakmont is one of the oldest, most traditional courses in America. It has a history steeped with tradition having hosted seven US Opens, five US Amateurs and three PGA Championships, and will play host to the US Open in 2007.

It is a very private and very exclusive members-only club that prides itself on its reputation as having a golf course that is in tournament condition seven days a week, setting the standards for day-to-day maintenance and conditioning at the highest level. The club also boasts the world's fastest greens from day-to-day over summer.

Oakmont is currently ranked number four in America's top golf courses and is number two in course conditioning, second only to Augusta National. The golf course is currently in the middle of the biggest renovation/restoration in its history, with superintendent John Zimmers and renowned architect Tom Fazio using 100-year-old photos to restore the golf course back to its old charm, while at the same time lengthening, narrowing and adding to the 190-plus bunkers in preparation for the upcoming US Open.

Zimmers has an obvious passion for turfgrass management that is reflected by the quality product he presents every day. He has a wealth of knowledge and experience to share. He has worked on some of the best courses in the US including overseeing the grow-in of Sand Ridge Golf Club in Ohio. He was actually headhunted to take over the top spot at Oakmont coming into the US Open.

Zimmers has hosted numerous trainees from The Ohio Program in the past. He expects nothing short of the best from all of his interns



Oakmont Country Club is renowned for boasting some of the slickest greens in the world and has hosted numerous US Opens in its long distinguished history. It is also home to one of the world's most recognisable bunker complexes – the Church Pews

## Mean greens and hallowed grounds

**The Ohio Program has provided many up and coming Australian greenkeepers the chance to work at some of the United States' leading golf courses. For 21-year-old South Australian Luke Partridge it afforded him the chance to work at one of the world's most exclusive country clubs – Oakmont. Here he outlines his time at the Pennsylvania course which has a reputation for producing the fastest greens in world golf.**

and staff included. He pushed us to our limits working up to 90 hours a week with us for almost four months without a day off. Needless to say it was the hardest summer of my life but the things I learnt and the experience I gained was invaluable.

To intern under a superintendent who demands perfection daily, and is known as one of the best in the world, was a huge honour. The Ohio Program works with many of the best courses around the US, such as Merion, Pine Valley, Augusta, Shinnecock and many more, but you have to realise that the top clubs

micro-manage their courses and to learn from this management style is really beneficial.

### NEW TECHNIQUES

Upon my arrival at Oakmont in March 2005 I was thrown straight into the thick of it. We started out with drill-n-fill, a renovation practice that was entirely new to me. The concept is simple; it is a machine that drills holes 12 inches (30cm) down and fills them with sand promoting deeper root growth and superior drainage. I say superior drainage because the drill bits drill down to within inches of the sub-

surface drainage lines making infiltration much more efficient.

The days of drill-n-fill were long and tiring – 16 hours daily of filling the machines with 5/50 dry sand and cleaning the greens of the excess sand and clay soil left from the drilling.

Another process that was done in autumn that was similar to this was the dry-jecting of greens. The dry-ject machine injects sand into

the greens via high pressure (450psi) jets of water followed by a rush of dry sand leaving virtually no mess and unnoticeable holes that healed very quickly.

Zimmers was a huge advocate of getting as much sand into the predominately clay soils as possible, maintaining the importance of having a deep healthy root system especially considering the stress the greens were under.

Once the holes left from the aggressive drilling had healed adequately we were straight into spring aerification of the tees, greens, approaches and fairways. After the greens and approaches were aerified, sand was then hand swept into all the holes on all 18 greens and approaches, including three large putters.

Zimmers is a huge fan of hand sweeping sand as he believes it is the best way to make sure all of the holes were filled. He believes that drag mats can pinch holes shut and do not push sand down nearly as well as hand sweeping. This is attention to detail at its finest, and it works. Doing things right often means you do it by hand, the old fashioned way. Who would believe that I had to learn that in America?

After the grind of spring renovation, myself, along with a 40-man crew, settled into a general routine, one which I had never experienced before. As I mentioned earlier, the standards of day-to-day conditioning were set extremely high, which meant that the golf course was pushed to its limits everyday and was basically 'living on the edge'.

The idea of having the course in tournament condition every day meant keeping it as dry as possible but still green, improving playability and lessening the chance of disease. This meant that tee, fairway and rough heads were run for just three to four minute cycles once a night. Wilt was kept at bay during the day by a 10-man hand watering crew that scouted the course for hotspots for up to 15 hours a day. ►

◀ To add to the pressure, the crew was also responsible for keeping cool the truckloads of cool-season bluegrass and fine fescue sod being laid daily in hot (26°C) and humid (83 per cent) conditions. The state of the art irrigation system was only used during the day in extreme circumstances so there would be times where syringing entire fairways by hand was the only option.

**MEAN GREENS**

Oakmont is all about green speeds. The members expect the greens to stimp no less than 12 on a normal day, weather permitting. They are not disappointed.

Daily mowing routines at the peak of the season usually started with a double cut by triplexes, double or triple cut with hand units and then double rolled. The mowers were set at .086 of an inch (2.18mm). During a tournament we would double cut and double roll each evening after play before repeating the routine the next morning.

Putting five cuts on a green in the morning was quite an experience. The first green to be cut would be number nine up by the clubhouse which was lit up by spotlights. It was an awesome sight to see six walk mowers and two triplexes bustling across the green trying to avoid each other and at the same time try to concentrate on their line of cut, which was virtually impossible to see.

A lot of the time the greens would be so

**WHAT IS THE OHIO PROGRAM**

Run by Ohio State University, the programme brings 19-28-year-old single guys and girls up for 12 to 18 months to work on some of the most exclusive golf courses in the United States. You have to be drug free with no criminal record, have a clean drivers license and most importantly a willingness to learn and ability to endure long hours of on-the-job training. Irishman Mike O’Keeffe manages the programme and brings in over 100 turf trainees a year from all over the world.

The programme has been a popular avenue for many Australian greenkeepers who have developed a strong reputation as excellent workers. A number of current superintendents have undertaken the programme including Sam Myott (The Heritage), Shane Brogan (ex-Torquay Golf Club), Ben Marshall (Club Pelican), Ben Cavanagh (Brisbane Golf Club), Darren Moore (Lakelands) and David Goldie (The Dunes), who has since become the point of contact in Australia for the programme.

For more details on The Ohio Program ([www.top.osu.edu](http://www.top.osu.edu)) contact Mike O’Keeffe on [okeeffe.1@osu.edu](mailto:okeeffe.1@osu.edu) or David Goldie on [dngoldie@hotmail.com](mailto:dngoldie@hotmail.com)

dry that there would be no lubrication for the mowers and they would start to bounce. A hand waterer was then called and he would give the green a very light spray.

Because of the low mowing heights, Zimmers and his two assistants would carefully inspect all the mowers on the first cut every morning to make sure they were cutting properly. If anything looked even slightly out, the mower would be called in and a mechanic sent out with a gauge to double check the heights. This happened quite often. The highest stimp reading to be taken at Oakmont was 15 and some days the greens were unstimtable.

The regular low mowing, rolling and weekly applications of Primo meant that the *Poa*-bent canopy grew in extra tight, not to mention the fact that the surfaces have evolved over 102 years, being the same turf that was planted in 1903. To say that the greens at Oakmont were especially unique would be an understatement.

However, with this amount of stress on the turf, disease management was essential. Automatic irrigation was never run on the greens or approaches. They were monitored carefully by hand waterers who would apply very light syringes during the day and only if the greens were footprinting. Syringing kept the greens ultra fast and alive!

The preparation of the greens at Oakmont was a unique practice that is not performed anywhere else in the world on a daily basis. I learned so much being exposed to this pressure. On top of that, chemical applications were also obviously of high importance with each application being worth around the five figure mark. The pressure was always on the applicator to perform on a weekly basis.

**HEADING SOUTH**

In contrast to my stay at Oakmont, my next placement was at the Sea Island Resorts on the premier Seaside Course on Sea Island just off the coast of Georgia which is ranked the number one golf resort in the US and number 22 public access course. Sea Island has played host to a number of PGA events including the UBS Cup in 2003.

The two worlds of the traditional country club and the ultra modern and exclusive resort

course were like chalk and cheese. Where Oakmont made the course challenging for members by growing the rough and speeding up the greens, Seaside cut rough short and only single cut greens to make play more enjoyable for visitors and to get as many rounds as possible in a day.

What Seaside lacked in conditioning in comparison to Oakmont, it made up for in its aesthetic appeal. Seaside is situated on the edge of an island surrounded by marshland, ocean inlets and old oak trees draped in Spanish moss. It is as much a wildlife sanctuary as it is golf course. Bald eagles gracefully patrol the skies and I even saw dolphins swimming in an inlet between the No.8 tee and fairway.

I arrived at Seaside just after overseeding. Their overseeding had been hampered by 24 inches of rain received during the remnants of a hurricane. The seed had germinated causing numerous seed washouts leaving irregular patterns on mainly the *Poa* areas around the tees greens and approaches. The wet conditions also caused an outbreak of pythium.



**In the lead-up to the 2007 US Open, Oakmont has undergone one of the biggest restorations in its history, with superintendent John Zimmers and renowned architect Tom Fazio using old photos to restore some of the course's old charm**

The seedling like state of the *Poa* caused prolonged disease damage. Getting these areas to germinate evenly presented a challenge that was eventually overcome by numerous applications of Stardust *Poa trivialis* via rotary spreaders and with the help of

some favourable weather. Numerous fungicide applications were made at a curative rate.

Seaside's bermudagrass was overseeded with perennial ryegrass on the fairways and rough at a rate of 500lbs per acre (approx. 227kg/0.4ha) and Stardust *Poa trivialis* on the



**Through The Ohio Program Luke Partridge spent more than a year working at Oakmont and then at Sea Island Resorts in Georgia**

greens, tees and approaches at a rate of 18lbs per 1000sq ft (8.2kgs/92m<sup>2</sup>). These turfgrass varieties were selected because they are obviously cool-season grasses that will stand up to some heat stress in the early summer months but are not so heat-tolerant that they will not burn out during transition.

They were also selected because of the reasonable \$2 per pound price. However this is still an enormous amount of money when you think of how many pounds it takes to overseed an entire course. You could gauge the course budget solely on the extensiveness of its overseeding process.

Another challenge at Seaside was adjusting to the cultural differences of training with an almost entirely Hispanic maintenance crew, something I have never experienced before. However, once you get over the language barrier you find that most of these guys are really nice, laid back, hard working and appreciative people that are willing to teach you some Spanish in return for a little English.

### LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Stereotypically, American golf courses are said to be over-watered, over-fertilised and willing to sacrifice playability for aesthetic appeal. I believe this is completely untrue, at least on the courses I experienced.



**A large portion of the restoration work is targeting the course's 190-plus bunkers**

I believe American superintendents have an edge in that they are able to present a course perfectly in a condition that is suited to its specific situation. I was lucky enough to see both ends of the spectrum, training at both a top end private country club and one of the best resort courses in the States, giving me a taste of maintenance practices that were extremely different in every way but funnily enough ultimately striving to achieve the same goal.

Along my travels I met some great people and invaluable contacts from all over the world. I also travelled to Niagara Falls in Canada and New York City and got to see most of the east coast of America. I was also lucky enough to attend some great golf tournaments on top courses (including The Masters) and even attended the 2006 GCSAA national turf conference in Atlanta.

I think the major lesson learnt working in America under such professional conditions is the importance of communication on a golf course. It also gives you a well trained eye for detail and gives you a better understanding of the differences between the practices employed in Australia and the US.

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*Luke Partridge hails from Adelaide and completed his apprenticeship at D&D Curators before moving to Mt Osmond Golf Club. While there he received a Rotary Scholarship to take part in The Ohio Program. Partridge completed his turf management studies at Torrens Valley TAFE.*

*Since writing this article Partridge has taken up a position in New Zealand helping construct the new Jack Nicklaus-designed Kinloch Golf Club near Taupo under superintendent Stephen Marsden. 🌱*



**Among the renovation practices used at Oakmont is 'drill-n-fill', where 12-inch (30cm) holes are drilled down to within inches of the sub-surface drainage lines to promote deeper root growth and superior drainage**