

BEYOND THE GUARDED GATES

The Pine Valley Experience



Adam Mortimer and fellow Pine Valley staff hand broom one of the greens following topdressing

In Vol 5.5 of Australian Turfgrass Management we reported on the range of internship programs open to up and coming turf managers to further their careers. In this edition, Adam Mortimer from the Brisbane Golf Club recounts his time spent on internship at the prestigious Pine Valley course in New Jersey, USA, perennially rated as the best in the world by many of golf's leading publications.

After spending two full days travelling from Brisbane to Columbus and a further three days at Ohio State University, I got a chance to meet the people behind the Ohio State University International Agricultural and Horticulture Intern Program.

I went on a tour of the university - the second biggest in the country - and saw the incredible football stadium which seats an amazing 105,000.

With around 110 international interns currently studying through the Ohio program, Michael O'Keeffe and his staff had every last detail organised for my arrival and gave me a warm welcome the American way.

Upon entering through the carefully guarded entrance gates at Pine Valley Golf Club, I certainly had high expectations of the course. However, anything that I had imagined previously would not even come close to the reality of this amazing golf facility.

After a two-hour tour around the course and surrounding property, I quickly came to realise why Pine Valley is ranked the No.1 golf course in America and the world by the likes of Golf Digest and Golf Magazine.

Pine Valley is situated just south of Philadelphia in a town called Clementon and sits upon 180 acres of slightly hilly, pine tree covered land that boasts predominantly sandy soils.

George Crump designed the course with construction starting in 1913. Unfortunately he died in 1918 with four holes still in construction and so was unable to witness the completion of the masterpiece he had designed. H.S Colt took over the project that was finally completed in 1919.

Pine Valley is a very private men-only club. Not many people know it exists and because the course does not host a major PGA tournament it receives very little media attention, just the way the members like it.

The club is steeped in history and follows very ancient club policies and traditions. Every hole is unique with the golfer being put to the ultimate test on every hole.

Although not on the PGA tournament calendar, course preparation is no different with members and the very select few guests lucky enough to pass through the gates expecting tournament conditions every time they head on to the course. This is the way the members want it and as a result Pine Valley remains a mystery to the general golfing public.

At Pine Valley, staffing levels fluctuate depending on the season. When I first started we had 51, which was obviously a big surprise, and as the season progressed we reached as high as 65 at one stage.

This included five assistants, two assistants in training, and between five and 10 interns who all came from various backgrounds across the US.



Adam Mortimer hydrojects one of the practice greens at the Pine Valley Golf Club

There was a mix of full-time workers who had been there for over 20 years through to local high school kids who started at 12pm each day and worked through until their assigned tasks were completed.

The interns and assistants do all the specialised cultural practices and are expected to work long hours to keep Pine Valley in perfect condition.

During the peak summer periods total staff numbers increased to 65 with a separate crew of 10 Spanish-speaking Americans helping prepare the course for daily play.

The Pine Valley old course is maintained links-style, with fairways and greens kept hard and fast and not overly green through controlled watering and fertiliser programs.

The latest cultural practices are also used, keeping the design and playing conditions the same as Crump had originally intended.

The facility also boasts a 10-hole short course designed by Tom Fazio. It is a replica of the old course, but is par-three only and simulates the second shot of some of the course's famous holes. There is also a massive driving range and short game area.

Within the Pine Valley property there are also 25 residences, 11 of which have bentgrass putting greens in the back yards that are maintained by the staff at tournament speed.

The old course greens are all *Poa annua* and the short course and practice facilities are a bentgrass mix, with each assistant designated a specific area to oversee.

As an intern I worked closely with the assistants and was given a wide variety of projects to complete, with a very enthusiastic

superintendent always on hand to answer any questions or problems that cropped up.

Interns are relied upon to complete the majority of the specialised cultural practices and are under constant pressure to learn and adapt to the methods used and to put them into practice on all of the fine turf.

Weather conditions played a significant part in our daily routine and were constantly monitored by weather stations set in the irrigation computer and via the Internet with radars on display in the office.

During the summer, temperatures reached as high as 40 degrees Celsius and combined with high humidity the cool-season grasses became stressed within hours meaning constant hand watering was required to keep wilt and hot spots under control.

Pine Valley has a state-of-the-art Rainbird Cirrus central irrigation computer with six-inch main lines along each fairway and misting heads around all the green banks, and Rainbird heads covering all the greens, tees and fairways as well as the residential gardens.

Pine Valley has a total of five separate pump houses that feed the irrigation lines and one

dedicated primarily to pump fresh water to the drinking fountains and residences.

They only use this in extreme conditions and the superintendent prefers to hand water greens and fairways to keep the course playing hard and fast.

With so much stress on the cool-season grasses during the summer months, disease prevention is the highest of priorities with pythium and anthracnose constantly monitored through soil and tissue tests.

Assistants and interns are constantly on the lookout while mowing and walking the greens daily for irregular dew patterns or any weak plants in high-traffic areas.

Pine Valley also has several leading USGA agronomists and consultants on hand to inspect and inform on any problem areas.

All interns are trained in chemical applications, which was one of our main duties along with disease identification and record keeping. It was vital an application wasn't missed because the consequences could have been devastating.

Needless to say, a lot of responsibility rides on the assistants training the interns and

handing off some of the pressure that comes along with such a famous course where any minor imperfection is noticed and nothing but perfection is required.

Interns are the first to arrive each day to set the mowers up and the last to leave, making sure all equipment used during the day is back where it belongs and the workshop is secured.

The workload is huge and the staff average 75 hours each week and are expected to be there every day during the summer to keep the course in pristine condition.

Interns also help with hand mowing the green and tee banks along with bunker preparation when the weather conditions are favourable.

The bunkers at Pine Valley are more like waste areas with no rakes in them for the golfers to tidy up footmarks and we only raked them twice a week, except during tournaments when they were raked daily.

Bunkers were also kept firm to minimise footmarks but fluffy enough for the golfer to execute a bunker shot. Bunker preparation at Pine Valley is very unique and is another challenge staff members have to deal with.

BEYOND THE GUARDED GATES

The Pine Valley Experience

Towards the end of my stay, staff numbers fell dramatically to 15 regulars, and with two major tournaments hosted in early October it was a madhouse.

Pine Valley superintendent Richard Christian has been at the helm for the past 16 years and secured the job when he was just 22-year-old.

He expects nothing short of the best from his staff and has a wealth of knowledge on managing cool-season grasses in extreme conditions – hot and humid in the summer to three feet of snow covering the whole course during the winter.

I enjoyed working under him immensely and gleaned as much knowledge from him as I could.

While at Pine Valley I interned with guys from Muirfield Village, Oakland Hills, Castle Pines and Merion who all had experience and ideas to impart from the big tournament courses and colleges across America.

Richard expects all interns to gain a memorable yet educational experience while at Pine Valley and to proudly carry the prestigious name with them wherever they go.

I would encourage anybody in Australia to make the big step and take up an overseas internship, whether it is through the Ohio

program or another scheme. It certainly opened up my eyes to the world of turf management and the experience I gained was priceless.

There are many people I have to thank for encouraging me to take this opportunity and for organising my placement. They include Michael O'Keeffe (program coordinator), David Goldie (the Australian advisor for the program) and Brett Morris of the Brisbane Golf Club.

Editors Note

Since writing this article, Adam has migrated south for the winter and together with fellow Brisbane Golf Club intern Angus Mahoney, will be based in Key Largo at the private members course Cardsound. After his time there, Adam plans to return to Pine Valley for a further five months before returning to Australia.

For further details on the Ohio State University intern program, contact David Goldie (dngoldie@hotmail.com) or Michael O'Keeffe at okeeffe.1@osu.edu. 🏌️



AMERICA'S TOP-15 GOLF COURSES, 2003 As Ranked by Golf Magazine

1. Pine Valley, New Jersey (1)
2. Cypress Point, California (2)
3. Shinnecock Hills, New York (4)
4. Augusta National, Georgia (5)
5. Pebble Beach, California (7)
6. Pinehurst No.2, North Carolina (9)
7. Sand Hills, New England (11)
8. Merion (East), Pennsylvania (14)
9. Oakmont, Pennsylvania (15)
10. Winged Foot (West), New York (18)
11. Pacific Dunes, Oregon (19)
12. National Golf Links of America, New York (20)
13. Seminole, Florida (22)
14. Prairie Dunes, Kansas (23)
15. Crystal Downs, Michigan (24)

(#) Figure in brackets represents world ranking