

Metropolitan Golf Club's unique sandbelt vegetation provided a visually striking frame to the course during the recent ISPS Handa World Cup of Golf



Tournament test



Tournaments are great for showcasing the art of preparing elite turf surfaces, but they can be hard on out of play areas writes ATM environmental expert Kate Torgersen.



The past month has seen a number of Australia's leading golf courses showcased to the world as they hosted major tournaments such as Emirates Australian Open and the ISPS Handa World Cup of Golf. Metropolitan Golf Club (superintendent Dave Mason) on the Melbourne sandbelt hosted the latter and as I am sure everyone will agree it came up an absolute treat despite some pretty adverse weather conditions.

Hosting a tournament of this scale can be a challenging time for a superintendent and their crew and also for those charged with overseeing and maintaining the landscape and plantation areas. Management of such areas is just one of the many facets that go into getting a course ready to host a major tournament. Spectator galleries, tournament infrastructure and set-up can cause significant damage to these areas, while post-event there is the inevitable restoration of areas needed.

With the World Cup visiting Melbourne for the third time in six years this November, I was fortunate to have a look around Metropolitan Golf Club the week before the tournament started and caught up with vegetation manager Ben Burke. It was an opportune time to walk around Metropolitan's wonderful plantation areas and discuss with Ben the various projects he has been working on, some of them long before Metropolitan was announced as World Cup host, and to gain an insight into the challenges that such an event presents.

In 2016, Metropolitan Golf Club together with golf course architects Crafter and Mogford embarked on a significant Course Improvement Plan. A key part of the plan was to look at the plantation areas and I was lucky enough to have some involvement with

this process. Ben was appointed by the club in 2017 and the plantation areas are being well managed and are considered a major asset to the course.

The initial areas targeted – the 2nd hole boundary and rear of the 7th green – have established well and are beginning to look like they are remnant parts of the course. A variety of native indigenous species were planted, with the help of many enthusiastic members who volunteered their time in what was an exciting project for the club.

Adding to the excitement was the announcement in late 2017 that the club was to host the 2018 World Cup. While it was a tremendous fillip for the club, for Ben it raised questions as to what it would mean for the course improvement plan and his management of the plantation areas.

Knowing that the amount of traffic was about to considerably increase, Ben decided that to reduce potential plant loss, any revegetation works from that point on would be with native grasses only. The main reasoning behind this was that native grasses establish quicker, can handle traffic better and, depending on the level of damage, most of the time will bounce back.

Ben's main focus also switched from project mode to visual maintenance, ensuring the plantation areas were at a high standard by the time the tournament was broadcast live around the world. One added bonus of hosting the tournament was the additional resources Ben had at his disposal which assisted with weed management, planting and general tidying up of the areas. Volunteers also played a significant role in getting these areas ready for the tournament with a number of working bees held in the months leading up.

Leading up to the World Cup, some challenges Ben had to face included a spray ban three weeks out from the tournament. This ban was to ensure there were no visual effects from having dead/dying weeds seen on TV. I must say, watching the last day's play while on holiday in Bali, the plantation areas looked amazing, especially seeing the golden wispy native grasses contrasting the immaculate playing surfaces that Mason and his team presented.

Speaking with Ben after the tournament he was surprised by the lack of damage to the vegetation areas caused by World Cup spectators: "You could hardly notice that we had thousands of people walking around the course over five days. Even where traffic was directed through vegetation, I noticed most spectators stayed to the sandy areas and left other areas untrampled. Vegetation was mainly affected by media/broadcast contractors running cables and erecting camera towers around the course and golfers and officials walking directly over vegetation in certain areas, including in some instances with buggies which was a bit hard to witness. But overall it was very minimal and will recover very quickly."

Having now experienced a tournament and the impact it has on the plantation areas, especially at a club where there has been a significant investment made, Ben has a few suggestions when it comes to protecting these areas.

"It would be great to be able to walk the course with the tournament officials and staff who were setting up the ropes. There were some areas of the course which directed spectators straight through vegetation areas unnecessarily where tracks could easily have been used.

"Also having a brief of possible walking areas a few months in advance would have allowed me to plant some heathland plants, including rarer ones, in areas which I knew spectators would be excluded from. I now have to wait until next year to plant some of these areas out."

Despite the challenges such an event presents, overall the World Cup was a huge success for Metropolitan and again showcased just how unique Melbourne's sandbelt courses and their landscapes are. The way in which the plantation areas presented is a great testament to the hard work that Ben and the team at Metropolitan put in during the lead-up to the World Cup.

During 2018 alone, he and a band of wonderful volunteers planted between 15,000 – 20,000 indigenous species. Further plantings are planned for 2019 with around 5000 expected to be placed at various locations according to the course improvement plan. Other focuses for Ben in the coming 12 months will be continued weeding of areas which already exist and hopefully introducing an ecological burn in one or more remnant patches to enhance the existing vegetation.



Since 2016 Metropolitan has embarked on a course improvement plan with the plantation and out of play areas a key focus. The boundary of the 2nd hole was one of the first areas to be worked on





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