

Mansfield Golf Club is located about three hours north east of Melbourne in the Victorian Alpine region



# Mansfield Golf Club VIC

Located in Victoria's beautiful alpine region, Mansfield Golf Club notched up its centenary in early July. Superintendent Tony Cooksey, who has spent his entire eight-year turf management career at the club, gives ATM an insight into this country gem.

**Superintendent:** Tony Cooksey.

**Nickname:** Tuffas.

**Age:** 32.

**Period as a superintendent:** Five years.

**Association involvement:** VGCSA.

**Period at current club:** Mansfield has been home for my entire turf management career – eight years.

**Turf management qualifications:** Cert III Horticulture (Turf Management) at Wodonga TAFE.

**Tell us a bit about your background in turf management.** I have always had a keen interest in outdoor work whether it be gardening or mowing lawns, so it was a natural progression to seek work in horticulture. During my latter years at school I did a lot of work experience at Mansfield Golf Club but they didn't have vacancies for an apprentice so I spent four years working in a local bakery before heading to Melbourne to work for a landscaper. After two-and-a-half-years of city life I returned to Mansfield to start work as a mature age apprentice at Mansfield Golf Club.

**Give us an overview of Mansfield Golf Club and some of its unique characteristics.** Mansfield Golf Club's 18-hole golf course was formed in two separate stages almost 70 years ago. We boast

a modern clubhouse with bar/gaming/restaurant/pro shop facilities open seven days a week. The lower parts of the golf course are home to significant swamp gums that line the fairways. Some of the soil types in the lower areas have major soil drainage problems that require careful management, particularly

during irrigation seasons. The rest of the golf course is semi-undulating making walking a healthy choice for golfers. Narrow fairways and small greens are unique to Mansfield and provide an interesting test for even the best golfers. The course has been rated in the top three in country Victoria.

**Take us through your turf management operations at Mansfield and how you have fine-tuned them during your time as superintendent?** When I

first started, maintenance was carried out on a demand basis – we waited for things to happen before treating the problem. Now we adopt a preventative maintenance regime which in turn reduces the spread of disease and frees up staff to concentrate on other tasks around the course. Our maintenance programmes are structured to meet the seasonal demands of the golf course – the winters are generally cold and wet and the summers hot and dry – and the playing conditions expected of management.

**Is it an easy/hard course to manage?** The soil profiles of the low-lying areas of the golf course are mostly clay based and our greens are mostly push-up so the course does get wet in the winter. As a result we need to be on the ball with our irrigation programme as the course heads into autumn and winter. As soon as March arrives we stop irrigating our fairways and hand water greens where needed. This allows the course to dry out in anticipation of the wet conditions to follow. Summer, of course, is the exact opposite with extreme temperatures demanding we keep moisture up to the turf on a daily basis. If we lose moisture for any reason for just a single day it is difficult to get it back.

**What are some of the major challenges facing Mansfield Golf Club both from a turf management and general club management perspective?**

From a turf management point of view, periods of prolonged drought are perhaps our greatest concern and while we made an important decision to invest in a reclaimed water programme five years ago we need to ensure our turf remains in A grade





condition to meet the complexities drought-like conditions bring. From a club perspective, declining membership numbers in recent years is a focus for management as general operational costs are increasing at a fast pace. Membership has also been a number one priority of our membership, marketing and promotions committee with a real emphasis on juniors and new entrants to the club. The club has given a commitment to members to be debt free by 2012. This will provide management with additional revenue to meet increased costs.

As for the future, the club has been successful in renewing and extending its gaming machine entitlements under the Victorian Government's post-2012 gaming arrangements. This is a substantial financial commitment for the club and should accommodate the future population growth anticipated in the Shire over the next 12 years. It will also allow the club to continue to provide outstanding golf and social facilities for its members and guests and also maintain its leadership role in supporting the local community.

**Outline any major course improvement works you have recently completed or are in the pipeline?**

The club adopted a Course Master Plan developed by Michael Clayton Course Design in 2003. While the plan itself is not a blueprint for the future it has become an important planning tool for our course

and match committee. Since the adoption of the plan we have completely renovated our 9th green, installed 14 new greenside and fairway bunkers, renovated and/or rebuilt eight tees. Our latest project has involved changing our par four 13th hole into a par five by extending the fairway some 152 metres and building a new green on vacant land we had previously used as a dump. We opened this new hole – called the Centenary Hole – as part of our 100th birthday celebrations on 9 July.

All course improvement works have been funded by members through an annual capital works levy of \$50 per member matched on a dollar for dollar basis from surplus revenue. The new works provide the club with an opportunity to raise its profile among other clubs in the north east and meet the expectations of the membership to continually improve playing conditions.

**How is Mansfield Golf Club faring in the water management stakes?**

Up until 2004 the club relied on town water to irrigate sensitive turf during hot summer periods – water restrictions often forced the club to hand water greens and let fairways and tees almost die. Fortunately management recognised the need for the club to investigate alternative water sources and started developing options in the late 1990's for committee consideration. The club also recognised that potable water was indeed a finite resource (as well as expensive) and should not be wasted.

As a result, planning for reclaimed water use was accelerated and we entered in to a contractual arrangement with Goulburn Valley Water in 2003/2004 to use reclaimed water on the golf course. While the capital investment in reclaimed water was extremely expensive at the time, the decision has virtually drought-proofed the golf course as the authority's reclaimed water storage has a capacity in excess of 250 megalitres.

**What are some pros and cons of being a country-based superintendent?**

Country people are generally more laid back then their city cousins. While country living is a lifestyle choice it does have



**Mansfield Golf Club course superintendent Tony Cooksey**

**The lower parts of Mansfield Golf Club are home to significant swamp gums that line the fairways**





◀ **Narrow fairways and small greens are unique to Mansfield and provide an interesting test for even the best golfers**

its setbacks as expert assistance is always a couple of hours away and you can't pop down the street to pick up parts on a needs basis. Also you are a long way away from industry colleagues so sharing course issues is by telephone rather than popping over to see them for a face-to-face discussion.

**Are expectations of course presentation and conditioning any less than that placed on your metropolitan counterparts?** Unfortunately no. We have a lot of members who reside in Melbourne and people who visit from city clubs who quite often ask me why we don't have this or why our course doesn't compare with city courses. My only answer is we have a very conservative course budget and only three full-time course staff (one of whom is a first year apprentice). If we had the staff and budgets of our metropolitan counterparts I am sure we would meet their expectations. Having said that, our members are for the most part very proud of our golf course and the manner in which it is maintained and presented.

## OFF THE COURSE - TONY COOKSEY

**Family:** Just me and my little Jack Russell 'Chips'.

**Any claims to fame outside of turf management?** I am unofficially the 'Mayor of Mansfield' – a dubious honour and self-bestowed.

**Any unusual hobbies/past-times away from turf?** My other passion is football. I have played for Mansfield most of my life including a senior flag in 1996. I coached the reserves from 2005 to 2009 and this year I moved down the highway to coach the Bonnie Doon seniors.

**Favourite sporting team:** Melbourne Demons.

**What book are you reading now?** Ricky Ponting's 'A Captains Diary'.

**Golf handicap:** 10

**Favourite golfer:** Camilo Villegas – exciting to watch.

**The best thing about Mansfield (aside from the golf club) is...** everyone knows everyone. The town folk are so friendly and always willing to lend a hand when it's needed.

**What do you do to get away from it all?** Camping, fishing, water skiing and regular no undy-Sundy's with mates at my place.

**Do you have to be more resourceful as a country-based superintendent?** Country superintendents have to wear every type of hat, from greenkeeper to mechanic to labourer. Sometimes we need to improvise especially when machine parts might take up to three days to get to us. We have used rather unusual but nevertheless effective techniques to keep mowers and other equipment in working order until parts arrive.

**How important are the relationships you have with other nearby country course supers/trade reps?**

Networking is very important. I rely on information from trade reps all the time. Deano at Simplot, Bill at K&B Adams, Matt at Oasis and Mark at Globe to mention just a few are always willing to help us keep making the golf course better. I have also formed a close working relationship with Andrew Ryan at Mooroopna Golf Club and Bill Daunt at Shepparton Golf Club.

**How do you make sure you keep abreast of the latest turf management techniques and methods?**

Supers from around the north east are always willing to share knowledge and my club supports my attendance at association meetings, trade days and turf seminars and visits to other golf clubs both in the country and city. Trade representatives are always proactive particularly with new products and they have a wealth of information on most of the problems supers face in turf management. We also rely on industry publications and the Internet.

**What are some of the more unusual requests you have had as a superintendent of a country course?**

During late autumn and winter earthworms are prevalent on the greens and members (mostly my dad) ask me to pick them up and save them for fishing bait!

We have had to round up cattle and sheep on the course as the property abuts the local council sale yards and recently we had to try and catch a Shetland pony which had wandered on to the golf course. The pony kicked and bucked every time my apprentice went up to it – I stayed back and gave instructions.

**Which piece of machinery gets trashed the most and if you had a wish list what would be the next major ticket item that you would like to purchase?**

We are fortunate to have a management group that lists golf as the club's core activity despite having gaming and other services. The general committee recognises our small staff numbers make life difficult sometimes, particularly when we have to take leave so they make sure we have up to date equipment. We depreciate all our machinery over a seven-year life span and trade-in equipment when it reaches five years of age. This guarantees a shed full of modern equipment that in turn reduces down time and maintenance costs.

Our Iseki front-end loader tractor gets trashed the most because it is used for such a wide range of jobs. There are a lot of old cypress trees on the course and they are forever losing their limbs so the front-end loader is used to push them up into piles for burning. I would like to replace it with a FEL/backhoe.

**Do you have any interesting pieces of machinery, which have been manufactured out of necessity or any old pieces of equipment that you keep alive?** The club's first fairway mower (circa 1930) was hand built by a member and donated to the club. It pulled a set of three second-hand gang mowers. Before that grass was kept down by grazing sheep and cattle on the course. Our most cherished item of machinery today is a four-wheel peewee Honda 70 motorbike that we use as a bunker rake. The brackets are welded up and the drag mats are made from old bedknives and four-inch bolts welded into them.

**Do you think country superintendents have a better work-life balance than their metro counterparts?** Yes I think so. Less travel and traffic and outside influences. I live two minutes from the

club and we are allowed to work our own hours. This is handy during daylight saving in particular as within 25 minutes of knocking off we can be skiing or fishing on the nearby lakes.

**What is one product you wouldn't be without?** Wetting agent.

**Favourite spot on your course?** In summer, the fridge in my office after a hot day on the golf course. In winter, our 15th green with the snow-capped Victorian Alps – Mount Buller in particular – as a backdrop. Simply breathtaking.

**Most pleasing/rewarding moment during your time at Mansfield?** Being named Apprentice of the Year for the north east region and then runner-up in the VGCSA Apprentice of the Year in the same year. Other rewarding moments are when visitors and members make an effort to come up to staff and tell them how magnificent the golf course is. It reminds me that we must be doing something right!

**Name three golf courses that you would like most to visit?** Augusta National, Royal China and any course in Dubai. 🌴

## AT A GLANCE - MANSFIELD GOLF CLUB

**Where in the world is Mansfield?** About three hours north east of Melbourne in the Victorian Alpine region, with Mt Buller and Mt Sterling forming a spectacular backdrop.

**Course specs:** 18 holes, 5527 metres.

**Greens:** Bentgrass – Penneagle and Penncross.

**Fairways:** Local couch (*Poa* in winter).

**Tees:** Local couch with fescue and ryegrass.

**Cutting heights:** Greens (3.4mm), fairways (15mm), tees and surrounds (10mm), first cut of rough (64mm), rough to tree line (89mm).

**Members:** 578 golfing members, 327 social members.

**Annual rounds:** Green fee rounds 5200, competition rounds (members) 8750 and non-competition (members) 6100.

**Major tournaments/events:** Mansfield Pro-Am, two Trainee Pro-Ams and annual October tournament.

**Annual course management budget:** \$256,000 – includes employment costs, machinery purchase and running costs, energy, rates, repairs and maintenance and depreciation.

**Staff structure:** Geoff Payne (secretary/manager), Tony Cooksey (superintendent), Kane Blunt (apprentice – final year), Matthew Anderson (apprentice – first year), Todd Eddy (school-based trainee), Neil Clutterbuck (PGA professional).

**Climate:** Mansfield Golf Club is located in north eastern Victoria with the Victorian Alps - Mounts Buller and Sterling – forming a backdrop. Cool temperate climate. The course has an average rainfall of about 720mm with a largely winter incidence. Winters are cool to very cold with temperatures ranging from 0-12°C. Snow falls regularly on the Alps and surrounding high country and sometimes on the golf course. From April-October we experience severe frosts. In the warmer months the average temperatures range from 10-30°C+ with very high evaporation rates in the summer months.



**Mansfield's fleet of John Deere machinery**

**Water sources:** Reclaimed (treated wastewater) 60+ megalitres per annum. Potable water 5+ megalitres (based on average annual usage).

**Irrigation system:** Pump station rising main from Goulburn Valley Water's treatment works (250ML reclaimed water storage to the golf course). Two 45,000 litre tanks store reclaimed and potable water on site. Potable water is used on some sensitive areas and to purge pipelines. Backflow prevention devices are installed on all mains water tappings. Water is delivered throughout the course via a fully automatic reticulation system. Rain Bird (valve in head) sprinkler system to tees, greens and fairways.

**Renovations:** Greens are cored with 5/8" tines late October, early November and then mini-tined late March. Tees and fairways are aerated to a depth of 150mm prior to and after summer.

**Major disease pressures:** Fusarium in winter, dollar spot in summer.