



PHOTOS: CRAIG GEEVE

Duntryleague Golf Club is located in Orange, NSW, and has been home to course superintendent Craig Geeve since October 2023

Pushing the limits

After spending the majority of his career working at some of Sydney's elite courses, two years ago Craig Geeve headed out of the city and landed his first superintendent role at Duntryleague Golf Club in Orange.

Australia is blessed with many regional golf courses which well and truly punch above their weight. Duntryleague Golf Club, located in Orange, NSW, is one of those and since October 2023 it has been home to newly-minted course superintendent Craig Geeve. Having spent time at the likes of venerable Sydney clubs Muirfield, Elanora, Royal Sydney, Pennant Hills and Bonnie Doon across the first two decades of his career, it was time for Craig, now 38, to leave his own mark. And he has wasted little time since arriving in Orange, helping to elevate the Duntryleague property which is steeped in history.

Duntryleague is one of two golf courses in Orange which is about 250km west of Sydney and a similar distance north of Canberra. It's most striking feature (tree-lined golf course aside) is the imposing state heritage-listed mansion which doubles as its clubhouse. Constructed back in 1876 by the Dalton family,

it has become a symbol of the club and a link back to a family which played a significant role in the development of the local community.

The 'Duntryleague' property upon which the Dalton family resided was sold to The Orange Golf Club in 1935. In 1946 the club officially took over the running of the mansion for the purpose of establishing a residential country golf club, with the

CAREER – CRAIG GEEVE

2023-present: Superintendent, Duntryleague GC, NSW

2017-2023: Assistant superintendent, Bonnie Doon GC, NSW

2016-2017: Senior greenkeeper, Royal Sydney GC, NSW

2014-2016: Part-time Diploma teacher, Ryde Horticulture College, NSW

2011-2016: Assistant superintendent Pennant Hills GC, NSW

2010-2011: Greenkeeper Elanora CC, NSW

2004-2010: Apprentice, Muirfield GC, NSW

clubhouse becoming part of the mansion in 1955. The Orange Golf Club still owns and operates the site and buildings to this day, with extensive development work taking place over many years to turn the vast property into a championship 18-hole golf course.

Since arriving at Duntryleague, Craig has made significant inroads to improve the conditioning of the course, in particular the greens. Those improvements were rewarded when the 2025 Australian Top 100 Public Access Golf Courses rankings were released, with Duntryleague moving up 15 spots overall from 86 to 71. It also jumped up in the list's 'aesthetics rankings' from 40 to 33. Such a result was a huge boost to Craig and his team and demonstrated they are on the right track.

Heading into autumn, which is perhaps one of the best times to visit Duntryleague as the colours of the many trees around the course change, we caught up with Craig to look back on his career and see how he has settled into his first superintendent posting...

How did you end up in turf? Did you choose turf or did it choose you? As I was approaching my final years in school, I was lucky enough to have a par 3 hole in the backyard as we lived on acreage. It was because of this I was torn between carpentry and turf management. I decided to pursue turf management as some people told me you end up resenting your job. I didn't want to lose that love of carpentry. I therefore chose turf not knowing I would be consumed by it.

Tell us about your journey in turf management that ultimately lead you to your current role as superintendent at Duntryleague? My journey officially started at Muirfield Golf Club in Sydney where I completed my apprenticeship and started my associate Diploma. Then the opportunity came to work with some of my college peers at Elanora Country Club before moving to Pennant Hills Golf Club where I took on the role of assistant superintendent. I also finished my Diploma in Sports Turf Management while at Pennant Hills. It was then that I accepted a role as part-time Diploma teacher at Ryde Horticultural College.

I continued to teach but my full-time job took me to Royal Sydney Golf Club as I wanted to be involved with a major tournament which would be the 2016 Australian Open. I finished working at Ryde Horticultural College as I pursued studying at Charles Sturt University. After the success of the Australian Open, I moved to Bonnie Doon Golf Club as assistant superintendent from 2017 up until 2023 when I was successful in getting my first superintendent role at Duntryleague.

It's a pretty unique property with some interesting history. Was that part of the appeal of taking the role? It contributed to the decision absolutely, however, one of the major appeals was to transform a property with minimal resources and budgets. Duntryleague had good foundations but there was a lot out of place which excited me to change and transform. I wanted to challenge everything I had learned and use the teachings and experiences to create a golf course that exceeds expectations. I firmly believe that if you can manage a facility with minimal resources and budgets and produce high quality standards that shows true talent.

What does your team look like? Currently we have five full-time staff – myself, two groundsman (greenkeepers in training), a 2nd year apprentice and mechanic. We also have two casuals that we use during summer and

In what is his first posting as a superintendent, Duntryleague has provided Geeve a canvas upon which to use his past learnings and experiences to create a golf course that exceeds expectations



Geeve (second from left) and the Duntryleague maintenance team and volunteers in front the club's historic 1876 mansion which has acted as its clubhouse for more than 70 years

school holidays. We have a fantastic team which has been together now for just over a year. It's not always perfect but we are like family and everyone looks out for each other.

What is at the top of your priority list as a superintendent? My priority is to continue learning so that I can improve myself and help build the skillset of others to improve the industry. Creating an environment where staff feel valued and looked after is important also, as is producing turf surfaces that far exceed the budget available as mentioned before.

What does great leadership mean to you? I know its cliché but it's about looking after the team. Many managers say it but don't follow through. Without your team, you are limited to

what can be achieved. Looking after my team is my main priority and the reason the property has improved so much. Every member of the team knows they are integral and have their own skillset. Everyone is teachable, some just don't want to change. It's my job to find the best way they learn and to equip them with the skills to move on in their career but give them an environment that they don't want to leave. Leaders are responsible for creating the environment for the people that get the results.

Who has influenced your career and why? Honestly, everyone I have worked with and for I have tried to take everything on board, whether positive or negative. Sometimes you experience bad situations and those were the times I really took note and decided I would





"We have a fantastic team which has been together now for a year... Creating an environment where staff feel valued and looked after is important, as is producing surfaces that exceed the budget available." – Craig Geeve

never put one of my staff in those situations if I ever had the privilege of managing people. Those that have impacted me in positive ways and helped me to succeed know who they are. I appreciate the relationships I have within the industry from managers, colleagues, apprentices, students, teachers, contractors, suppliers, club members and also, most importantly, family and friends.

What do you feel your biggest career achievement is and why? Immediately I thought of major tournaments or renovation projects, but I asked a friend what they thought and they mentioned staff management and motivation. The two times I have been an assistant superintendent I have walked into environments with a vast array of talent, motivation, age and direction. At Bonnie

Doon Golf Club, superintendent at the time Cameron Smith (now at Sanctuary Cove Golf & Country Club on the Gold Coast) had his hands full with the agronomics, construction and clubhouse duties. He trusted me to manage the staff with Brad the foreman. The three of us focused on our strengths to create an environment that was efficient, motivated, respectful and where everyone bought into the culture. We always tried to have fun while working hard and learning from each other with everyone contributing every day. It was actually a very hard job to walk away from.

What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges facing the turf industry at the moment and what sort of action do you feel is needed? That's a loaded question! A lot of people talk about staff issues. There are less and less qualified greenkeepers coming through the system currently, but I am personally looking for good people with the right attitude, not necessarily a qualification. I'm happy to train people and infect them with my passion. We can get them qualified later once they realise their potential.

I think an issue that maybe affects more isolated clubs would be member expectation. The cost for the quality the members and golfers expect usually doesn't match the fees. Everything is going up in price, but I often hear members saying the club can't raise fees. Why? The fuel I buy isn't decreasing and chemistry isn't getting cheaper, so why shouldn't membership increase? Even staff wages are low. The members want perfect turf and clubs complain they can't find staff? Maybe there's a correlation...

Going from Sydney to regional NSW is quite the change. How have you and the family coped with the change? The family loves the tree change. We have been lucky enough to have country living on both sides of the family so we knew it would work. I'm very lucky as my family give me a huge amount of grace and let me obsess over work. Shannyn has been sensational and a pivotal part of my career. She is fantastic with the kids and it's because of her patience everything remains stable. I cannot thank her enough.

How do you juggle the pressures of work, kids, family life and looking after yourself? I must admit to being quite bad at this. I love my family but I am consumed by my work. I really do enjoy being at work, talking about turf and related topics, educating people and managing the course. I don't know what it is, but I'm never satisfied and there's always something that can be done to improve the surfaces or improve the operation. Since finding my feet I do try to attend sporting events and school activities but there's a lot

of room for improvement. Catching up with friends is always refreshing and helps me to recharge, but unfortunately that doesn't happen all that often. Currently, I have been chatting to friends over the phone which helps me to unwind; it's just a pity I no longer have the long drive to work to chat!

I know you like pushing the limits – why is that? I love a lot of sports and documentaries, especially those that the average person can't compete in – the Tour de France, (American rock climber) Alex Honnold's free solo climb of El Capitan (in Yosemite National Park) and (Kenyan runner) Eliud Kipchoge breaking the two-hour barrier for the marathon. These are amazing feats and just the thought of what they go through to prepare and achieve is unimaginable. If no one pushed the limits we wouldn't learn anything or advance.

You've run some serious kilometres over the last 10 years. Are you training for anything in particular at the moment? Currently I'm not running, I'm having a break. My father always said if you don't enjoy what you're doing then don't do it. I have fallen out of love with it for the time being, but I can see myself running again at some point. But for context, yes, I was running between 70-100 kilometres per week and racing in half marathons. It was enjoyable and I loved pushing myself beyond what the mind thought was possible.

You learn a lot about yourself in hard times and what you're capable of achieving. I even used to train in the worst possible conditions so that when it came to racing I would be in a comfortable environment. I used to love that mounting feeling of every part of you wanting to stop or give up, but you just keep going. It has helped train my mind to endure.



*"Without your team you are limited to what can be achieved. Looking after my team is my main priority and the reason the property has improved so much."
– Craig Geeve*

How would you push yourself in training? Can you give some examples? I would purposely go out on long runs in 30-plus degrees to train my mind and body and also head out in pouring rain. There's not much worse when running in soggy shoes and absolutely everything is wet. It's uncomfortable but worth it. Not many people are willing to do these things which gives you a competitive edge. I live by "My lack of dedication is an insult to those that believe in me". People reveal their true character when no one is watching.

What is a job outside the turf industry that you have had and what did you learn from it? I have been involved in wool production. I tried shearing, but I'll stick to growing turf! I roustabout at Stoneleigh every August helping my brother and have contributed to producing a '1PP' bale of wool every year for the past



four years. A 1PP ('Perfect Plus') bale is the highest quality wool you can produce. To put it into context, of the 1.5 million bales that were produced in Australia last year, only 18 were classed as 1PP.

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Seeing another industry and the intricate detail that goes into producing the very finest wool is extraordinary. I love pushing the limits and exceeding expectations and appreciate that in all fields, whether its producing surfaces on a golf course or in this case wool. Most people can't be bothered to put the extra effort or time into producing the best possible product. I have noticed throughout my career and life in general, many people want to be at the destination but struggle to discipline themselves to endure the journey.

What do you do for fun? Currently I'm pushing myself hard at work to produce a certain product, so I don't have much time for myself, but I used to rock climb 4-5 times a week. I really enjoyed being up a cliff in such a fragile environment when everything is put into perspective. Even when I had a rope, the further you climb before clipping the greater the fall and that feeling is indescribable. There are times you physically can't hold on any



"I'm very lucky as my family give me a huge amount of grace and let me obsess over work. Shannyn (left) has been a pivotal part of my career." – Craig Geeve

longer but you refuse to let go, it's just a matter of time before your hands open and you hold your breath!

Finally, any advice for younger staff in the industry looking for their next opportunity or building their careers? I asked my apprentice after a few months of starting to have a good hard think about whether he wanted to do this as a job or a career. I think there is a big difference and I don't want any of my staff to waste years of their lives. I want each staff member to not only enjoy work but to use the opportunity to better their careers and not just earn money. There are a lot of opportunities coming up in the next 5-10 years within the industry as everyone is aging and there are fewer graduates coming through.

I would suggest that younger staff need to find a manager that will invest in them and allow them to push their limits. However, the staff member needs to go above and beyond – "If it doesn't challenge you, it won't change you". Try and have someone to check in with and keep you accountable for your goals and aspirations. Remember, difficulty reveals who you really are! 🙌

PRODUCING QUALITY SURFACES ON A BUDGET

As Geeve notes in the accompanying Q&A profile, he's the sort of superintendent that likes to push the limits and think laterally when it comes to managing his turf surfaces. If you follow him on LinkedIn, some of his recent posts have highlighted the practices he has adopted since arriving at Duntryleague in the spring of 2023, working with a restricted budget to help produce the best surfaces possible. Geeve is also an unabashed fan of *Poa annua* greens which have been a primary focus as he continues to make improvements across the course. In a recent LinkedIn post, Geeve spoke about some of the approaches he has been taking and the successes he and his team have had...

"Not having a very big budget forces me to think outside the box and manage my chemistry and mechanical practices very closely, which I'm enjoying. Producing very good surfaces without the ease of buying the 'best' products is satisfying. Not having 20 staff and endless machinery also creates satisfying results when we get it right. In my first full year at Duntryleague I reduced the greens budget by 28 per cent purely by applying the products correctly, managing the timing and water quality (no waste).

"Managing greens health is also vital in reducing chemical applications. I have played with high rates of Trinexapac-ethyl and other PGR's to therefore reduce mowing to only three times a week and rolling four times. This way the plant is under less stress and isn't constantly repairing its wounds. I have used far less fungicide this summer and I'm looking forward to seeing the costings



*Improving the quality of Duntryleague's predominantly *Poa annua* greens has been a main focus for Geeve*

over my second year. Having the mowers on a grinding program also improves turf health, but that's a topic for another time.

"I have also been working on tightening the turf surfaces... As many know, I love working with *Poa annua* and there are multiple reasons why I love this turf species. We would have at least 80 per cent *Poa annua* in our surfaces and I'm only trying to increase that percentage. As we know, *Poa* is very adaptable and will learn how to combat almost every situation. At a country course it is unfeasible to try and combat it, however, even if I had the budget would I try and stop it? No. I think those finances would be more beneficial being used elsewhere.

"If clubs didn't throw thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars at controlling *Poa* which turfgrass would

prosper - *Agrostis* or *Poa*? If *Poa* is so weak what happened to your bent surface? The other interesting trait is that the *Poa* passes on its genetic memory to its offspring, so you can train the plant. Obviously, the environment plays a huge part in *Poa* health and success and in my environment the plant thrives and produces fantastic surfaces. It's not unbearably hot, we don't freeze over and we have huge amounts of shade which all suit *Poa* and it shows as it has learnt to survive for 80-plus years here.

"I have read a lot of articles about pH testing of water and chemistry but have not met anyone that tests their mix on a regular basis. It's very interesting seeing what chemicals and what rates change the pH. It's very easy and cheap to buy and calibrate a handheld pH meter and I recommend it."



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