

Elwick punt pays dividends for Hay

Ladbrokes Park Elwick track and facilities manager Chris Hay became the second Tasmanian in four years to receive the ASTMA Excellence in Sportsfields and Grounds Management Award at the recent national awards in Brisbane.



The irony of it all certainly wasn't lost on Chris Hay. Having just accepted the ASTMA's Excellence in Sportsfields and Grounds Management Award, sponsored by Toro, at the National Turf Industry Awards in June, the industry veteran took to the stage and proceeded to give an acceptance speech that would go down as one of the highlights of the night.

Those who know Hay will concur that he is definitely from turf management's old school with a sense of humour to boot. He has carved a wide-reaching career over the best part of nearly 40 years, the majority of that in his home state of Tasmania but also with a handful of stints in Queensland. Whether it has been as a golf course superintendent, working in local government managing multiple grounds or operating a successful turf renovation business servicing most of the Apple Isle, Hay's commitment to the industry over that time has been unquestionable. However, it would be in his current role, as track and facilities manager at Ladbrokes Park Elwick, where he would ultimately be recognised for his skills and high standards.

Three years ago Hay answered a call for help from Tasracing after what had been a tumultuous period for the state racing body. Despite having just spent millions on the redevelopment of Elwick, race meetings were being called off due to an unsafe track. Such was the dire state, the Tasmanian Government commissioned an enquiry, with Hay charged to implement the report's recommendations and ultimately take over as track manager.

As Hay quipped during his award acceptance speech in Brisbane on the eve

of the Australian Sports Turf Management Conference, never in a million years did he think that his turf career would end up at a racecourse. Admittedly, he loved a punt – he joked that his wages are debited straight into his online TAB account – but he also knew his expertise could help bring about the much-needed change that Tasracing was after.

Together with his team, along with some hard work and dedication, Hay has been able to literally get Elwick back on the right track. It has subsequently regained its prominent status, with the quality, consistency and resilience of the surface regularly receiving compliments from trainers and jockeys right across Australia.

In winning the ASTMA Sportsfields and Grounds Management Award, Hay became the second recipient in its short four-year history to hail from Tasmania after Blundstone Arena head curator Marcus Pamplin received the award in 2022. Hay also made it back-to-back Excellence Award wins for the state after Craig Walker from Devonport Country Club won the golf equivalent at the 2023 conference in Adelaide.

"I'm a little bit humbled to be fair," Hay noted upon accepting the award in Brisbane. "I have been in the game for 40 years and you don't go to work to win awards. You look to improve your patch of turf every day and make the job for the people that work with you as enjoyable as possible so they can progress their careers."

"Looking back across my career, I never thought I'd end up at a racetrack but I am glad I did. Tasracing has been through a lot of change in recent times and I'm very grateful to CEO Andrew Jenkins and track facilities

manager Bryan Dunn who is not only a great turf manager in his own right, but a really good friend. To all the turfies out there, you do a magnificent job. It's a tough gig some days. Give your staff a big pat on the back and keep supporting them in their endeavours."

TASSIE TURFIE

Hay has pretty much experienced all sectors of the sports turf industry across his career. His journey began in 1987 as greenkeeper/superintendent at the New Norfolk Golf Club, a small nine-hole course that resides about 40 minutes upstream of Hobart on the River Derwent. It was there that he discovered his passion for sports turf management and over the next 19 years he would continue to hone his craft with tenures at several golf courses, including stints at South Mole Island Resort and the Capricorn International Resort in Queensland.

Returning to Tasmania in 1995, Hay took over the role of superintendent at Kingston Beach Golf Club just south of Hobart before branching out on his own in 2006 as owner and operator of Coretaz, a turf renovation and maintenance business that serviced a plethora of local clubs and turf facilities.

Ladbrokes Park Elwick has been a mainstay of the Tasmanian racing industry since the late 19th Century. It is home to the Hobart Cup which is raced every February

Following the success of Coretaz, in 2010 Hay started a position as turf coordinator for Kingborough Council. In this role Hay was able to foster a collaborative and educational environment for all staff derived from his years of turf management experience. One of his key responsibilities was to undertake the training, coaching and mentoring of all staff.

After eight years with Kingborough, Hay ventured north and began working at U-TAS Stadium for the Launceston City Council. He then had another stint in Queensland, this time as a team leader at the Riverway Precinct for the Townsville City Council. Again, Hay was crucial in the preparation and maintenance of an oval hosting AFL games. Once returning to Tasmania he then had short tenures with Programmed Property Services as curator and the City of Hobart as a turf maintenance tradesperson.

With a wealth of industry experience and roles under his belt, in late December 2020 Hay was seconded by Tasracing for a specialist turf position. The organisation was desperate to restructure its existing turf management practices and remedy some of the strong criticism from within the racing community. Hay accepted the challenge and

began his new role in January 2021, helping to set about turning the fortunes of Tasmania's premier racetrack – Ladbrokes Park Elwick.

HIRED GUN

Located in Glenorchy just north of Hobart, the Elwick racecourse has a long and proud history. Race meetings have been held on the site next to the River Derwent since the late 19th Century. It is home of the prized Group 3 Hobart Cup, which was first run in 1875 and is now raced over 2400 metres every February.

In 2004, Elwick underwent a major \$20 million redevelopment which saw the construction of a new 970m harness track and 700m greyhound track. With the existing 1990m thoroughbred track, the facility became a 'tri-code' racing venue. Fast forward 15 years and in February 2019, following that years' Hobart Cup, Tasracing began a \$12.5m redevelopment of the thoroughbred track in conjunction with StrathAyr.

In the preceding years, Tasracing had battled countless issues with the turf track, regularly leading to abandoned race meetings and/or an unsafe/unfair racing surface. With stakeholders and participants losing faith in Tasracing's turf management practices, the

upgrades were intended to resolve the issues and ensure the long-term future of racing in southern Tasmania. StrathAyr, whose grass tracks are highly regarded for their all-weather and high use capabilities, were contracted to construct the new 28m-wide track and provide a new first-class surface.

Tasracing assumed responsibility for Elwick's maintenance upon practical completion in December 2019, with racing returning in February 2020 for the Summer Carnival and Hobart Cup. After a short return, in April 2020 racing in Tasmania ceased for several months due to COVID before returning in late June. As the only state in Australia where the racing industry came to a standstill, a smooth transition back into racing was crucial for Tasracing to re-establish its foothold in the community and with participants.

Unfortunately, that would fail to transpire. Numerous turf management issues with the new StrathAyr track led to several race meetings being cancelled in the latter half of the year. Tensions piqued on 27 December following the late cancellation of the Tasmanian Guineas due to unsafe sections of the track which had been inadequately repaired. The abandonment made the headlines across

PHOTO: TASRACING





Elwick's Chris Hay (centre) celebrates his ASTMA Excellence in Sportsfields and Grounds Management Award with Tasracing colleagues Bryan Dunn (senior track and facilities manager, left) and Dave Manshanden (COO, right)

the industry and resulted in the meet being transferred to Launceston.

That, combined with other issues being experienced at the Mowbray track in Launceston, led the Tasmanian Government to commission an external review into the adequacy of Tasmanian thoroughbred racing track conditions, safety, standards, maintenance and inspections. Dale Monteith, a former chief executive of both the Victoria Racing Club and Melbourne Racing Club, and who at the time was chief executive of Harness Racing Victoria, was charged with undertaking the sweeping review.

To say that Hay was literally thrown in the deep end would be an understatement. He joined Tasracing as a turf specialist in the first week of January 2021, just days after the significant negative press that the Elwick track had copped. On Thursday 7 January, Tasracing released a statement, outlining their objectives and outcomes to get their turf management strategies back on track.



PHOTO: TASRACING

"On Monday 28 December, Tasracing flew in StrathAyr's senior track construction and repair expert from Victoria to inspect the problem areas and implement remediation works. StrathAyr also assigned local staff to assist with this work and Tasracing brought additional staff from Mowbray.

"Prior to Christmas, Tasracing appointed a dedicated turf specialist, Chris Hay, who started with Tasracing on 4 January. Chris's sole focus will be the turf track maintenance. Chris is a highly respected turf specialist and is sought after in Tasmania and interstate.

"In addition, StrathAyr staff will be in attendance over the next few weeks to assist Chris in managing the turf surface and modifying the maintenance program to provide the best possible outcomes moving forward. Further, Tasracing has been in discussions with Moonee Valley track manager, Martin Synan, for some time. Martin and his counterpart from Flemington, Liam O'Keeffe, visited the track on 5-6 January."

Following subsequent repairs undertaken by Hay, in conjunction with recommendations from StrathAyr, Synan and O'Keeffe, racing was deemed safe to return shortly afterwards with the track even receiving praise from jockeys and trainers.

A few weeks later, on 1 March 2021, the 'Monteith Report' was released which was highly critical of the existing turf management strategies Tasracing had in place. In his key findings and recommendations, which extended to nearly four pages of the 25-page report, Monteith outlined numerous new strategies that Tasracing needed to incorporate into their turf management objectives and outcomes. Among these included that...

- Tasracing review the effectiveness of its current track management structure, including key competencies and performance of managers reporting through to the CEO.
- A specific/tailored maintenance and management plan for Elwick is critical to overall success of the racing surface.
- Elwick, as a juvenile track, needs to be carefully managed. Overall good plant and root health is paramount in producing a suitable surface for racing. Without either of those the track will underperform.
- Tasracing needs to produce annual Track Management Plans (TMPs) for both Elwick and Mowbray. The integrated plans should include race meetings, rail movements, planned official trials, work to be undertaken between race meetings and an annual shutdown of six weeks to allow for major renovation works.
- Thatch management is necessary to ensure a healthy organic layer is kept open and does not form a dense mat that impedes water and nutrient movement into the profile. Regular coring and slicing will be required to break and keep the thatch layer open/not compacted. This is to be undertaken as the racing schedule permits.
- The conduct of feature race meetings at Elwick in late January and early February proved that with good maintenance practices, even after the concerns from the 27 December 2020 meeting, the track can race well.

Tasracing welcomed the findings and recommendations, with Hay playing an integral role in the strategic implementation of these. On the back of helping to turn the track around, in July 2021, just a few months following the release of the Monteith Report, Hay was promoted to the role of track and facilities manager at Elwick. In that role Hay is responsible for the preparation and

In February 2019, following that year's Hobart Cup, Tasracing began a \$12.5m redevelopment of the Elwick track in conjunction with StrathAyr

management of all three tracks (thoroughbred, harness and greyhound). Combined, Elwick is an immensely busy facility and between 1 August 2023 and 31 July 2024, Elwick's tracks catered for 131 meets across all three codes, including 24 thoroughbred race days.

Hay works around a frantic racing calendar to implement the Track Management Plan that he was integral in creating in the wake of the Monteith Report. The once-juvenile track has now matured nicely and under Hay's care continues to offer a premium product. Hay and his team conduct thorough track renovations in February and August of each year and also follow a demanding maintenance schedule developed by Hay throughout the remainder of the year to ensure all the report's recommendations are met.

"Over the past two-and-a-half years I have worked closely with Chris and from a turf management perspective his work is simply outstanding," states Tasracing's chief executive Andrew Jenkins. "Since commencing with Tasracing and taking responsibility for the management of the Elwick turf track, Chris's experience, skill and knowledge has resulted in Tasracing now being able to present one of the best turf racing surfaces anywhere in the world week in, week out. The quality, consistency and resilience of the Elwick turf track regularly prompts compliments from local and visiting trainers and riders. As CEO, it is a pleasure to welcome guests and participants to racing at Elwick and have complete confidence in the racing surface."

Adds Flemington track manager Liam O'Keeffe: "Chris has made an immediate impact on the racing industry by preparing first class racing surfaces throughout the year. When Chris commenced in the role at Elwick, the Hobart track was in its infancy and had



Following a series of race abandonments at Elwick, the Tasmanian Government commissioned the Monteith Report to investigate issues with the state of Tasmanian tracks and turf management practices

some issues on race day. Chris has nurtured the track along over the past few years and it's racing in outstanding condition. It has been a pleasure to get to know Chris personally and professionally and witness him making an immediate impact on the racing industry."

PROJECT AND STAFF FOCUS

In addition to his immediate remit of improving the integrity of the Elwick track and setting in place more effective turf management practices, Hay has also overseen numerous projects, works and events during his time with Tasracing. Hay handles all racing events,

including major calendar meets like the Hobart Cup, as well as project work that highlight the diverse skillset he has brought to the organisation.

Hay has overseen many irrigation installation and maintenance projects at several Tasracing facilities including Elwick, the Brighton Training Centre just north of Hobart and Longford Racecourse south of Launceston. Tasracing has invested significantly into industry-leading irrigation systems at all facilities to ensure stakeholders are satisfied with track quality. Following these upgrades, Hay subsequently oversaw the development and implementation of more thorough procedures for irrigation and fertilising/chemical strategies across Tasracing's facilities.

Another project Hay managed was the reconstruction of the Elwick mounting yard. Aside from the track itself, the mounting yard is arguably the area of the grounds that receives the most attention from the racing community, with horses parading around the area before and after each race. The former mounting yard was completely deconstructed and replaced by a modern and functional facility.

As well as his focus on a number of infrastructure projects, Hay has worked hard to develop an excellent rapport with his staff, not only through his hard work and dedication to the role but through being approachable as a manager. Hay conducts start-up meetings every morning to discuss the approach for the day and to answer any questions or concerns from his team. Throughout the day he regularly checks in on his team members to ensure they have everything they require and to ensure they're able to do their jobs in an effective and efficient manner. Once a month, a period of the day is scheduled for Hay to conduct a 'toolbox

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Since starting at Elwick, Hay has instituted the many recommendations made in the Monteith Report, leading to the surface again being widely praised by trainers and jockeys

meeting' and 'team huddle', where a WHS inspection checklist for the Elwick venue is completed. Hay also oversees the recruitment process for his track team and has helped to build a more diverse team.

As a testament to his staff focus, in an Employee Opinion Survey conducted by Tasracing in November 2023, Hay was one of only four managers who achieved a staff 'engagement' score of over 80 per cent and an astounding 100 per cent 'management' score from his nine employees that participated.

That engagement also flows up to management level, where Hay deals directly with the Tasracing Board, executive team and senior leadership team. Hay prepares regular reports for management on the Elwick tracks and often assists upper management by providing advice for other tracks that fall under the Tasracing banner. Notes Bryan Dunn, Tasracing's senior track and facilities manager: "Chris is excellent at communicating with all levels of management and is highly respected from the Board level down due to his excellent ability of being able to explain things in the simplest of ways."

In addition to his crew and management, another key part of Hay's role is dealing with a variety of stakeholders and end users. As a tri-code racing venue, Hay is in constant contact with the Tasmanian Racing Club, Tasmanian Trotting Club and Hobart Greyhound Racing Club, along with trainers and jockeys, the Office of Racing Integrity, racing media and the general public. Notes Jenkins again: "Chris consistently demonstrates an ability and willingness to engage with and manage a diverse range of industry stakeholders. Aside from his turf management expertise, he is held in high regard by all participants due to his effective communication style."

Hay's expertise has also been called upon overseas. Ellerslie Racecourse in Auckland, New Zealand recently returned to racing following a \$55m upgrade to a StrathAyr track. StrathAyr engaged Hay to give professional guidance to other facilities using their product and he was more than happy to share his experiences and help Ellerslie through a similar transition to that of Elwick.

Tasracing regularly organises seminars and tours of elite facilities, with Hay attending



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these to ensure he remains up to date with the most modern track and turf management practices. These have included racecourse manager educational tours of Hong Kong racing facilities Sha Tin and Happy Valley, numerous Tasmanian and national sports turf conferences and field days as well as study tours to tracks in Queensland and Victoria.

With a background working in local government, Hay arrived at Tasracing well versed in workplace health and safety legislation, HR practices and best practice systems. Tasracing also provides in-house training opportunities for its managers to ensure they are best prepared.

With machinery operation around sports turf facilities often providing the biggest risk, Hay has implemented machinery maintenance programs and proper servicing schedules. He's been able to develop up to date knowledge on all machinery requirements through developing exceptional relationships with Tasracing's equipment and machinery suppliers. He has implemented and continued to develop numerous initiatives for workplace health and safety including many standard operating procedures, pre-start checklists and inductions.

Hay also has a passion for upskilling his team members on array of equipment and machinery and teaches his staff best practices himself or actively facilitates external training courses as required. Several staff members in recent times have completed external training courses in areas such as chemical handling, chainsaw certification, HR licensing and forklift licensing, with his team now boasting a diverse skillset which aids in them being able to deliver exceptional results across all areas of the Elwick operation.

Hay's experience, skill and knowledge has resulted in Elwick now being able to present one of the best turf racing surfaces in the country across its 24 meets each year

PHOTO: TASRACING



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