



WORDS AND PHOTOS: BRETT ROBINSON WITH NICK CREELY

# Professional network

The latest instalment of the Jacobsen-sponsored Future Turf Managers' Initiative (FTMI) wrapped up in Melbourne in early March. ATM looks back on this year's program and what the 2024/2025 cohort took away from it.



Now into its ninth year, the Future Turf Managers' Initiative, sponsored by ASTMA Silver Partner Jacobsen, has provided a critical conduit through which nearly 200 aspiring Australian and New Zealand turf managers have enhanced their professional skills in the areas of leadership and management, with the ultimate aim of helping them take on more senior roles within the industry.

The 2024/2025 cohort comprised 22 turf managers from across both countries who began the program last November through a series of online seminars. As in previous years the cohort was split into four groups which were each led by a mentor, a former graduate of the program who helps guide the latest participants through the sessions and provide insights into their career experiences. Returning as mentors this year were **Liam Ash** (State Wide Turf Services, Vic), **Sam Davis**



SACA's Pat Dewhirst was one of four from South Australia to participate in the FTMI this year

(Queenstown GC, NZ) and **Matthew Oliver** (CSTM, Suncorp Stadium, Qld). Joining the mentor group for the first time, replacing Settlers Run superintendent Brenton Clarke, was 2020 FTMI graduate and now Eastlake Golf Club superintendent **Simon Blagg**.  
The full 2024/2025 FTMI cohort included: **Nathan Ambler** (Peninsula Kingswood, Vic); **Mitchell Austin** (Pacific GC, Qld); **Charlie Bolte** (Cromer GC, NSW); **Charlie Borella** (Thurgoona CC Resort, NSW); **Michael Bunston** (formerly Box Hill GC, Vic – now Rosanna GC, Vic); **Mason Calder** (The Kinloch Club, NZ); **Edward Cole** (formerly Te Arai Links GC, NZ – now interning at Muirfield Village in Ohio, US); **Patrick Dewhirst** (SACA); **Daniel Fulcher** (Maroochy River GC, Qld); **Jeff Gillies** (The Grange GC, SA); **Lachlan Hay** (Royal Melbourne GC, Vic); **Brett Irvine** (Barwon Heads GC, Vic); **Brent Johnston** (RACV Royal Pines, Qld); **Cameron MacDonald** (formerly Cottesloe GC, WA – now

Opposite: The 2024/2025 FTMI cohort, together with mentors and presenters, pictured at Essendon Football Club's Windy Hill ground

City of Wanneroo, WA); **Liam Maling** (MCC, Vic); **Matt McClintock** (Peninsula Kingswood, Vic); **Kingsley McConnochie** (Glenelg GC, SA); **Ricky Mether** (Trentham GC, Vic); **James Ross** (Harrup Park CC/Great Barrier Reef Arena, Qld); **Steven Spreadborough** (Aston Hills GC, SA); **Angus Vear** (NT Cricket); and **Craig Young** (The Cut GC, WA).

The online sessions covered a range of topics and were supplemented by smaller breakout meetings where each group was able to discuss content from the previous sessions and work together on set tasks that had been assigned.

The face-to-face gathering kicked off in the first weekend of March with a welcome dinner headlined by former champion Olympic swimmer Brooke Hanson. That was followed up on Monday and Tuesday by a range of presentations from leading figures, among them leadership and team culture expert Mark Carter, Carmen Sederino (Illuminated Story), Ben Gibson (The Toolbox Team), Peter Schumacher (Jacobsen) and behavioural expert Dr Juliette Tobias-Webb.

Added to this year's program was a visit to Windy Hill, the spiritual home of the AFL's Essendon Football Club. Turf manager Michael Salvatore from GrassUp gave the group a tour, outlining turf management practices on the unique suburban ground which hosts a steady diet of VFL, AFLW and local football during winter, as well as premier grade cricket in summer.

"It was a really intensive few days, but the level of interaction and engagement from the participants again highlighted the value of this program to those individuals looking to take the next step in their career," says ASTMA chief executive Mark Unwin, who also presented on resume writing, job applications and interviewing techniques. "Watching the groups hear from world-class leadership and management speakers and spend time discussing insights with experienced mentors was such a strong reminder of the opportunities that the FTMI opens up for professional development."

Adds ASTMA events and education manager Simone Staples: "The FTMI is always a great program. It is a privilege to be able to spend a few days with the next generation of industry leaders and give them the management tools to help further their careers. The support of ASTMA Silver Partner Jacobsen in this initiative and supporting the industry is greatly appreciated. We look forward to watching this year's group progress their careers in the coming years."



Pictured clockwise from top down: The Grange assistant Jeff Gillies during one of the group discussion sessions; Mason Calder was one of two NZGCSA representatives; Ed Cole (right) with Daniel Fulcher (left); and past FTMI graduate Simon Blagg, now superintendent at Eastlake Golf Club in Sydney, returned for the first time as one of four FTMI group mentors





*Pictured clockwise from top down: Shortly after the FTMI, Michael Bunston (left) was successful in getting the assistant superintendent role at Rosanna Golf Club; Brett Irvine in discussion with his fellow group members; Trentham Golf Club superintendent Ricky Methner shares his views; and Peninsula Kingswood's Matt McClintock listens on intently as mentor Sam Davis shares his feedback*

BUNSTON BOLSTERED

Across the first nine years of the FTMI, the program has achieved a more than 70 per cent success rate of past graduates going on to be promoted to senior roles after their involvement. That proved to be just the case for one of this year's graduates, with Michael Bunston (pictured left) securing the exciting new position of assistant superintendent at Rosanna Golf Club in Melbourne. Starting his new role on 2 April, Bunston had previously been foreman at Box Hill Golf Club. In what is a positive step forward in the talented 25-year-old's promising career, Bunston believes the FTMI helped to play a major role in him obtaining the promotion.

"I'm absolutely loving the new role so far," says Bunston. "Dean Bailey (Rosanna superintendent) has been really supportive and it's a great environment. I do believe the FTMI program played a big part in me getting the job. I got heaps out of it personally and there were probably a lot of factors behind that.

"Whether it was resume building, the structure, how you present yourself to reading other people's body language, it is important to learn about these things. Dealing with adversity is another and was one of the key things I took out of the program. It shapes you to be the best possible manager you can be, which is ultimately where I'm hoping to go."

Bunston said there were plenty of highlights in the program from a range of presenters and says Dr Tobias-Webb's presentation was one worth the time. He encouraged budding turf management professionals to invest the time into the FTMI, with valuable lessons to be taken out of it.

"When you're on your journey to becoming a superintendent, one of the keys is to be able to present to boards. The FTMI gave me some tools to have your facts straight and be clear in communication which is a key part of the industry," says Bunston. "If you're accepted into the FTMI program, what I found is you get what you put into it. Take notes, listen and learn and look at each perspective from the presenters."

A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

An important focus of the FTMI is also providing opportunities for turf managers who come from smaller regional facilities where staffing and budgets are often not at the same level as those in metropolitan areas. Joining the FTMI cohort this year was Ricky Methner (pictured left) from Trentham Golf Club which is about 70 minutes northeast of Melbourne. Methner, who got his start in turf through the AFL Sports Ready Program, serving an apprenticeship at the Capital Golf Club before stints in Europe, Medway Golf Club and Gisborne Golf Club, says the FTMI program was a beneficial tool in advancing his career.

"The FTMI program has really helped me identify what my goals are for my career and where I aim to be. It has helped me identify the best pathway to achieve my career goals," says Methner. "There was a lot to take away, something as simple as resume building and job-specific cover letters to budgets and their intricacies and even just picking the mentors' brains on a few things was invaluable.

"My biggest takeaway though was during Mark Carter's presentation and building a fun work environment through traditions and support which then translates into better outcomes for the club, staff and myself."

Methner says the main highlight was the presentation from former Olympic swimming champion Brooke Hanson, who won gold at the 2004 Athens Games in the 4x100 Medley.

"Her story of perseverance from being allergic to pool water and missing out on consecutive Olympics, as well as Brooke's positive attitude towards life, was really inspiring," says Methner.

Methner took over the role at Trentham a few years ago with a crew consisting of an apprentice and a two-and-a-half day casual. He says the FTMI program provided terrific learnings to take back to the day-to-day turf management of the regional course.

"I have tried to take a little bit of everything I learned and incorporate it into my management of Trentham, whether that's through Carmen Sederino's presentation on being confident and clear with my message when speaking to committees and membership or Mark Carter's team building and creating a fun, inclusive environment," reflects Methner.

"Also Ben Gibson's presentation and creating my own personal brand that I can portray to the membership and golf community, Peter Schumacher's budgeting presentation, learning about different personalities through Mark Unwin's presentation and how everybody is different with their own strengths and weaknesses and how to approach different personality types.

"Dr Juliette Tobias-Webb's presentation on how to speak to people was another one and learning that having a conversation can go many different ways just with the words and delivery I choose to use and how I can lead conversations to get a more positive outcome."

Methner says there are plenty of projects in the pipeline at Trentham which will keep him and his small team busy.

"I do really enjoy my role at Trentham. At times it can be frustrating regarding resources but it's also very rewarding at the same time," he says. "We are currently about to replace all the irrigation around the greens and tees in-house with a system that only one other golf course has used so far which will be a huge learning curve for myself and the staff."



*Pictured top: Sam Davis (middle) with his FTMI mentor group (from left) Kingsley McConnochie, Lachlan Hay, Daniel Fulcher, Matt McClintock, Mason Calder and Ed Cole*

*Pictured middle left: Matthew Oliver (third from right) with his FTMI mentor group (from left) Liam Maling, James Ross, Angus Vear, Cameron MacDonald and Pat Dewhurst*

*Pictured middle right: Simon Blagg (third from left) with his FTMI mentor group (from left) Ricky Methner, Brent Johnston, Steven Spreadborough, Charlie Borella and Nathan Ambler*

*Pictured above: Liam Ash (third from right) with his FTMI mentor group (from left) Craig Young, Mitchell Austin, Brett Irvine, Charlie Bolte, Jeff Gillies and Michael Bunston*

*Right: Windy Hill's Michael Salvatore (Grass Up)*







Nathan Ambler was one of two FTMI delegates from Peninsula Kingswood CGC in Melbourne

KEY TAKEAWAYS

As part of the program, all FTMI delegates have remained in touch with their groups and have committed to a series of goals and outcomes that they will work upon with the support of their mentors. Having such a professional network not only during the program but going forward outside of it is one of the big advantages the FTMI provides.

What follows is feedback from some of the other graduates from this year's cohort, what they took away from it and what areas they will be focussing on as they continues to progress their careers...

Cameron MacDonald (City of Wanneroo)

"The overall highlight of the program for me was the opportunity to make connections with so many people within the industry and, better still, future leaders. I now have contacts all over Australia and even New Zealand, all of whom currently have and will continue to have valuable knowledge and experience which

they are willing to share. To have a network set up like this and essentially handed to me on a plate is incredible and truly invaluable going forward.

"Separate to that and more specifically to the face-to-face side of things, the presentations were all very engaging and captured my attention throughout. Previous conferences and seminars which I have attended have struggled to hold my attention but during the few days in Melbourne I was very much engaged due to the presenters involving the group in discussions as much as possible.

"One of the best presentations was on personality types and the different ways in which everyone takes in information, the environments in which they thrive and how to get the best out of them. It put a lot of things into perspective and made me want to look further into doing it within my own team so that each individual can understand each other much better.



"As a result of the FTMI I will be looking to work upon building myself a better profile and personal brand. I would like to create a LinkedIn profile and do a better job of documenting my work. Certain ways I present myself at work and interact with managers and contractors is good, but can really be built on to make myself much better."

Matt McClintock (Peninsula Kingswood)

"I really enjoyed every speaker and topic that we covered in the program, but probably the highlight for me was being able to meet and spend time with other people in the same or similar position to me from all over the country. It was also great being able to sit down in a casual environment and talk about anything work related and this included with the mentors.

"I really thought Mark Unwin's social profiling message was great. Even though we only touched the surface, it has still allowed me to think more critically on how I can interact with each individual staff member and how I can do better forming a more positive working relationship with them. From the FTMI, I will be really focusing on improving my relationships with staff and how I portray myself to staff moving forward, especially with those that I may not have as much in common with. In addition to this I will be continuing to work on my public speaking skills."

Daniel Fulcher (Maroochy River GC)

"I really enjoyed my time during the weekly/ fortnightly Zoom meetings and face-to-face down in Melbourne. Everybody was really down to earth and open to networking. There were many highlights but the main one was the motivational speech from former Olympic gold medallist Brooke Hanson. Her speech was a rollercoaster of emotions and really connected with me. She had the entire group doing squats, laughing and having fun. Then within half an hour, Brooke had most of the group in tears.

"The FTMI was a real eyeopener not only for my career but on a personal level as well. A message that really resonated with me was how to build your own personal brand. After reflecting on the FTMI program, I have really focused on that and what actions can be taken for me to reach the level I aspire to be in the turf industry."

Steven Spreadborough (Aston Hills GC, SA)

"The highlight for me was the opportunity to network and connect with likeminded people with a love for turf and wanting to become leaders or become a better leader within their

"All speakers and mentors were great and I'll be recommending the FTMI to my staff who are looking to take the next step." – Brent Johnston (left)

organisation. The key message I took away was from all the lessons from Mark Carter – acknowledging/celebrating all the wins whether they're big or little as a team. It will increase the team's morale and increase the productivity and the product you produce as a team. Creating a good work environment will create a great workplace.

"This experience has made me re-evaluate the leadership and management style I have and aided me in the ability to assess everyone within my organisation to better read the type of person they are and ask the questions of what motivates them so I can tailor my leadership style to help suit everyone."

Brent Johnston (RACV Royal Pines)

"The FTMI is a great stepping stone for all turf managers to attend if they are wanting to grow their career within our industry. It has a lot of beneficial topics which are learnt/discussed and the people organising the program ensured it was run efficiently and enjoyable. All speakers and mentors were great and I'll be recommending the program to my apprentices and turf managers who are looking to take the next step in the future.

"The highlight for me were all the speakers. They really got their point across



"The overall highlight for me was the opportunity to make connections with so many people within the industry and, better still, future leaders." – Cameron MacDonald

when delivering their respective presentations as I found them all to be vital parts of becoming a turf manager. The one thing I took from the FTMI was being a mentor for our future turf managers coming through, helping apprentices and qualified greenkeepers grow their careers within the turf industry and

continuing to build platforms for people to grow for a future in the industry.

"The one area I have committed to working upon improving is public speaking and presenting. Being able to speak and get a message across to a larger audience will go a long way when I have to present to boards."



A trusted, Australian owned and operated company for over 53 years.



Now operating in QLD & NSW.

Exclusive distributors of ICL Turf Products in QLD, NSW, VIC & SA.



**K&B ADAMS PTY LTD**

1800 887 343 | info@kbadams.com.au

www.kbadams.com.au

36 AUSTRALIAN TURFGRASS MANAGEMENT 27.2

MARCH-APRIL 2025 37