

Green light for NSWGC

One of Australia’s most iconic golf courses underwent a significant makeover last spring and summer.

ATM editor Brett Robinson catches up with New South Wales Golf Club superintendent Mark Parker to reflect on the Mackenzie & Ebert greens and bunker restoration project.

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Mark Parker, superintendent of New South Wales Golf Club (NSWGC) in Sydney, likes to think that it also takes one to redevelop a golf course. Of anyone in the turf management industry, the NSWGCSA life member knows a thing or

two about golf course redevelopments. In his previous 30-plus years at Concord Golf Club, he oversaw two significant course projects under Ross Watson and Tom Doak. In a way, they were a precursor to what transpired recently at NSWGC where he has been superintendent since 2018 after taking over from good friend Gary Dempsey.

Between September 2024 and February 2025, the famed La Perouse club closed its doors to members and undertook one of the biggest redevelopments in its history. While not quite to the scale of its venerable eastern suburbs counterpart Royal Sydney up the road (see *previous article*), it was nonetheless a defining moment for the club and for Parker.

Any works undertaken to a world top 50 golf course will always be heavily scrutinised, but what has ultimately been delivered at NSWGC is one that has been widely celebrated. To achieve that, however, it has taken the aforementioned ‘village’.

As Parker is quick to tell you, the project throughout was a real “community effort”, whether that was using local contractors, leaning on the support of fellow Sydney superintendents and industry contacts and even having the wife of the lead architect laying turf on greens at one point!

It also started at the top with the NSWGC Board, in particular president Chris Coudounaris. Parker says having someone of his experience asking the right questions and making prompt decisions to keep the project moving forward was critical. It was indeed a collaborative effort across all levels which has helped to deliver a project that has exceeded expectations and enhanced the club’s reputation as one of the world’s best.

GREENS BEFITTING AN ICON

NSWGC holds a special place in Australia’s golfing landscape. As Parker notes, you don’t

get to be a world top 50 course without being special, and NSWGC is definitely that. It’s dramatic location on the La Perouse headland, gateway to Botany Bay, is the envy of most. It’s iconic 5th and 6th holes would rank among the most photographed in world golf, while its exposed coastal location means it can be an absolute brute. As predecessor Dempsey loved to joke, the wind there can “blow oysters off rocks” it is that strong, something that Parker has certainly come to appreciate.

For all its grandeur and natural beauty, the one area which had long been critiqued was the greens. Their shapes were largely two-dimensional and were bland in comparison to the sweeping natural landscape around them. The variety of pin locations was also limited due to greens size and factoring in the exposed nature of the site.

From a club perspective, over the past quarter of a century there had been a number of projects undertaken on course but nothing holistically. Indeed, when Parker started, the club wanted him to look at rebuilding four greens. His response was that if they were going to do four, why not get a recognised architect to do the lot and have consistency.

Taking that on board, the club initially engaged Doak (Renaissance Golf Design) to come up with a masterplan and also undertake the redesign of the 6th green which had been necessitated due to construction of a new public access coastal walkway. However, based on Doak reducing his consultancy work along with a few masterplan issues, the club and Doak decided to part ways.

Pivoting, in late 2022 the club announced the appointment of UK-based firm Mackenzie & Ebert (M&E) to develop a new masterplan overseen by director Tom Mackenzie. Although having a long list of high-end UK and European courses on their books, including a number of Open Championship rota courses such as Turnberry, Royal Portrush, Royal Dornoch and Royal St George’s, it was the company’s first assignment in Australia.

Unable to change the routing due to the course being located within a national park, the M&E masterplan would focus on greens complexes, bunkering, sandy waste areas and fairway shaping. Initially they had wanted to dramatically increase the number of bunkers and sandy wastes, which raised some concerns due to the windy nature of the site.





After a number of iterations, a final design was decided upon which did increase the number and size of those elements, with the club agreeing to increase the maintenance budget for these areas to cater for their upkeep.

Another initial hesitation Parker had was M&E's ability to do everything remotely. The company has a strong focus on technology, using CAD drawings and CGI graphics to provide a very good representation of the final finish to both members and shapers. Despite that capability, the club included in the contract with M&E that Mackenzie, as lead architect, would make three, 10-day visits to the course throughout the works to oversee progress. It provided Mackenzie the opportunity to make adjustments in the field with the shapers to achieve the overall vision, which Parker says was critical to the end result.

"I can't speak highly enough of Mackenzie, not only for what he has produced but just how good he was to work with," says Parker. "He was willing to listen and make changes along the way and I think the result we have ended up with has been all the better for that. The old greens were very two-dimensional and rounded and there wasn't a lot of variety



in terms of pin placements and shots. What M&E has done is create a lot more interest in the greens complexes, more pin locations and movement which ties in better with the wonderful landscape we have here."

VARIABLE DEPTH PROFILE, 777

With works commencing September 2024 and needing to be completed within a six-month timeframe, all construction was completed in-house using three experienced local shapers – Miles Raicevich, Craig Brown and Daniel Scott – who each worked on two greens at a time. Once six greens were bulked in, Mackenzie would come out for a stint and make any necessary changes prior to the gravel, sand and turf being installed.

Parker opted to construct the NSW greens with a perched water table, using USGA-spec gravel (7mm) and a variable depth sand profile. Taking inspiration from earlier visits and discussions with superintendents at Merion and Winged Foot in the US, where there are lower points in the greens a greater depth of sand (up to 350mm in parts) has been added to assist drainage. Similarly, where there are higher ridges and peaks, they have a lesser



The new 11th green from the tee (top) with aerial photos showing the old (below left) and new (below right) shape. The new greens complexes have been designed to blend in and take inspiration from the natural landforms of the La Perouse site

depth of sand (225mm in parts) so as not to drain as quickly, with the overall aim to try and even out the drying process across each green. Mackenzie was on board with the methodology and altered his drawings to accommodate it. He provided updated coordinates for the shapers to use the roving GPS units, quickly modifying the base profile and subsequent layers.

Unable to source a consistent 80/20 mix which Dempsey had used when the greens were reconstructed in 2011/2012, Parker opted for a sand from Terara near Nowra, NSW. Having seen its use at neighbouring St Michael's Golf Club, Parker had numerous discussions with superintendent Lee Sutherland over its performance in their Pure Distinction greens and the excellent results they had achieved. Shane George, now the assistant at The Australian, had also used the sand at Shellharbour with much success, further cementing in Parker's mind that it would be a good fit for NSWGC.

Complementing the new profile, Parker, after some comprehensive trial work, would select 777 bentgrass for the new greens, becoming the first course in Sydney to use the newer generation variety. The 777 replaced the Mackenzie variety which Dempsey had sown during the 2011/2012 works when the greens were converted across from *Poa annua*.

Parker was after a variety that was finer and denser than the Mackenzie as the new greens designs included extra pockets, particularly on the coastal greens, to allow for more pin placements which were protected from the wind. That would enable him to have the greens a little quicker than previously.

Over a couple of years the nursery green became a trial site with upwards of 10 varieties in plots. As well as observing those, Parker had also visited the US to view trial sites and clubs to get further data before making a final decision. In the end it came down simply to what was the best fit for their unique site.

"I'm not saying that 777 is the best bentgrass out there, but it is the best for here," states Parker. "We had it on the nursery and every time I went down there it looked the best up against the others. It was fine and dense, without being too fine and too dense. I'm a huge fan of Pure Distinction which is an unbelievably good surface, but for here, with the wind we get, 777 just seemed right.

"Speaking with a couple of experts from America, they pretty much said that the new

NSWGC has become the first course in Sydney to use 777 bentgrass. The greens feature a USGA spec gravel layer with a variable depth sand profile

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varieties nowadays all work, it's just about how you maintain them. In particular [777 breeder] Dr Richard Hurley made himself constantly available via email and even visited the course assisting where possible.

"With the Pure Distinction we were a bit concerned it would get too quick with the wind. If you grow it longer so it's not as quick, to me that always looks shaggy, so I prefer cutting it at what is its appropriate height. Lee (Sutherland) has Pure Distinction at St Michael's and they are brilliant. Even though he is next door it's surprising that little bit of difference in wind which we get more of here."

With 777 chosen, the next phase was determining whether to seed or solid turf. When Dempsey installed the previous greens he had seeded them, however, this time Parker opted to solid turf for a number of reasons. Key among those was the tight timeframe and the fact that all the works were being done in-house. The site's notorious winds were also a major factor. Parker can certainly attest that during the first few months of the project he lost count of the number of times they'd shape greens up only to come back the following day to find them half eroded.

As he had done at Concord, Parker reconnected with Frank Casimaty and StrathAyr who grew the 777 on their farm outside of Hobart, Tasmania. It was quite a logistical exercise to get the turf up to Sydney and to ensure it arrived in good condition. Due to changes in biosecurity regulations, the slabs of washed turf couldn't be packed with ice in a container due to the potential of it melting and creating run off.



New South Wales GC superintendent Mark Parker

To get around that problem, Casimaty called upon a neighbouring grape producer who had cooling rooms where the temperature could be dropped to 0°C. He was able to cool the pallets of turf for a few hours before putting them into refrigerated trucks which then went to the port, on to the boat and up to Sydney. All up it was a three day process from the turf being lifted to being laid on site at NSWGC.

HITTING THE BRIEF

A key focus of the M&E works was to inject greater character into the greens complexes and have them marry into the landscape and ridge lines better. They have certainly delivered on that front. In terms of overall strategy, green size has increased from one hectare to 1.5ha. The most significant changes have come with the 6th green which has effectively doubled in size, now measuring 1002m², and features a gravel layer which covers the entire green and surround to aid drainage.

Other key changes include a new front right section on the 5th green behind the greenside bunker, as well as a narrow 8m-wide entry into the 3rd green (pictured below) which



AERIAL PHOTOS: NEARMAP



is guarded by a deep revetted bunker that wraps around the front right-hand side. The 16th green and 19th greens have also been joined together to create a large double green.

The 3rd green was particularly satisfying for Parker and the discussions between him and Mackenzie around its eventual design provide a unique glimpse behind the great relationship they forged across the project. As Parker notes, it was his main role, along with president Coudounaris, not to design but to ask the right questions of and provide feedback to Mackenzie on the design brief.

To put the discussion into context, the 3rd hole at NSWGC is a dogleg left with a blind tee shot over a ridge down to a low fairway, with the second shot uphill to an elevated green. The green had been reconstructed by Greg Norman Golf Design in 2011 and was considered quite bland. Prior to that the green was an oblong shape about 35m long with a pinch in the middle which at its narrowest was 11m wide. The 2011 rebuild saw the green become more rounded and much wider.

"When I started here, I had a conversation with a Board member who said that one of the greens that could do with changing was the 3rd," recalls Parker. "It used to have two bunkers at the front, was a small green which you played uphill to and he said that if you had a wedge in your hand from the fairway below you were scared. He said the new design had lost that element."

"The original green M&E had drawn was 900 square metres which was wide at the front and back. We discussed it and they made a couple of changes, but then I mentioned the discussion with the Board member and I asked Tom what the narrowest green he'd ever designed was. His response was '12 metres'. I looked at him and said, 'You're not even trying!' I turned and walked away and we laughed."

"That night he sent me a message. He'd contacted his team back in England and the message simply read 'Royal Dornoch 9.5m'. I didn't respond, then about half an hour later he sends another – 'Postage Stamp 8.4m', referring to the famous par three at Royal Troon. I sent a message straight back – 8.4m it is then! And that's what we ended up with!"

"About four weeks before opening we had one of the head professionals out here from St Andrew's and I asked him what he thought of the changes. He'd played here 20 years ago and couldn't believe how dramatic the changes were. I asked were there any particular changes he liked and he straight away said the 3rd – 'I just wanted to drop balls and hit a wedge.' Bang! I knew Tom had hit the brief!"

The new 3rd green before (top left) and after (top right) and the new narrow front section of the green (left) which measures just 8.4m wide and is guarded by a deep revetted bunker to the right

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UNIQUE ELEMENTS

Outside of the new greens shapes, there are a couple of other unique features of the NSWGC redevelopment. Perhaps the most noticeable and striking is the almost 300-metre long sandstone wall that now separates the practice fairway from the adjacent 18th fairway.

The wall serves both a practical and aesthetic purpose. It defines the out of bounds down the left of the 18th and also prevents range balls from rolling onto the 18th fairway. More importantly, the sandstone mimics that which is prevalent around much of the Sydney region. Although the sandstone looks new and fresh at present, over time the plan is to get lichen to grow over it to give a more aged look.

While the wall itself is a unique feature, the manner in which it was built was also. Rather than using an external stonemason, the wall was constructed in-house, with assistant superintendent Steve Kazurinsky coming up with the tools to build the wall and leading the works. Kazurinsky worked under Parker at Concord before moving to Cabramatta Golf Club. He rejoined his former boss at NSW in 2023 and like many played a critical role in the redevelopment across a number of areas.

Using locally quarried sandstone, Kazurinsky sourced a special saw that could be put on a rail to cut it on an angle and create a bevelled edge for the top row of stone (see *photo above*). The level of detail also extends to the look of the sandstone itself. On close inspection, many of the blocks have been etched so that they look like old convict pickaxe markings. Again, this was all done in-house, with four NSWGC staff working away methodically at it at a time prior to the course closure and construction. The final piece was the installation, which was led by another of the management team Callen Boulton.

The work on the wall was a perfect example of what Parker describes as a truly unique team at NSWGC. They were involved in the project from start to finish, working ridiculously long hours to achieve the objectives and in a manner that made it enjoyable to turn up each and every day.



A striking addition has been the almost 300-metre long sandstone wall separating the 18th and practice fairways

As previously mentioned, M&E also incorporated more bunkers and sandy waste areas into the layout which was a point of contention early on. To address the issue of sand being blown out of the waste areas, Parker has come up with a novel way to hopefully reduce that. He has grown couchgrass through the bases (see *photo below*) which is then sprayed with a knockdown herbicide to “sing” the couch but not kill it. That way there is still grass to provide a matrix for the sand, which is placed on top, to bind with and hopefully lessen the likelihood of it being blown out.

Perhaps the most unique element of all, however, had nothing to do with the course. Every Wednesday for six hours throughout the majority of the project, Parker had a masseuse come in who would set up a table in the maintenance facility and provide 45-minute massages to staff working out on the course.

“He was brilliant and it was the best thing we did,” says Parker. “Dan Cook (The Australian) put me on to it. For the guys who are operating machinery, they’re sitting in excavators all day and their backs can get really sore. You’d see the guys go in and come out afterwards like a new person! It was little things like that which made a difference.”



HELPING HANDS

If there was a single moment that Parker says defines the project and the many who were involved in bringing it to fruition, it would come during one of Mackenzie’s visits when wife Amanda also travelled with him. With turf in the process of being laid, both Mackenzies rolled up their sleeves alongside NSWGC staff and helped to lay slabs of 777 on several greens.

At other points in the project, Parker seconded clubhouse staff and members of the Board to lay turf also. Even Parker’s course administration assistant Lucy Sacco, who is a qualified architect, played a key role with some of the design elements around the 1st tee. Parker says the buy in and adaptability from everyone was enormous.

“It was that sort of project,” reflects Parker. “It was a real community effort and I cannot thank enough all the people that helped out, especially the support from my NSW superintendent and industry colleagues.

“Chris Howe, who was with me at Concord for many years, lent machinery, provided advice and even came over to help lay greens and do a revet bunker with us. Close friend Dan Cook also played a similar role. I had David Stone’s (Pymble GC) pedestrian topdresser probably longer than I should have, along with machines from Jake Gibbs at Elanora. Dad and Dave’s Turf transported across one of their big Brouwer turf harvesters so we could strip turf off fairways to use on the surrounds, avoiding the importation of clay.

“Lee (Sutherland) would let me view his greens and pull plugs to look at the profile and rootzone. Even my predecessor, Gary Dempsey, was there if I needed to call him, although he probably wanted to charge at times. The support was just amazing and helped us to achieve a fantastic result.”

The number of sandy waste areas has increased, with Parker letting couchgrass, which is regularly hit with herbicide, to run underneath and help bind the sand to reduce the likelihood of blowout from the wind



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