

Historic Heretaunga

Royal Wellington Golf Club has a long and proud history in New Zealand golf and this June it adds another chapter by becoming the first international course to host the Toro AGCSA Golf Championship. ATM editor Brett Robinson catches up with highly respected course manager John Spraggs to get an insight into the course, its recent remodelling and his exacting maintenance operations.

Between 2011 and 2013, Royal Wellington Golf Club underwent a major transformation. A new-look championship 18 - the 'Heretaunga course' - was constructed which included four brand new holes including the par five 4th pictured

Pirongia Golf Club. Ever heard of it? For the vast majority of Australian Turfgrass Management readers that name will probably mean absolutely nothing. For NZGCSA members, some might have heard of it but only a few would be able to tell you exactly where it is.

A quick geography lesson then if you will. For the Kiwis, Pirongia is in the heart of the mighty Waikato, 12 kilometres west of Te Awamutu and half way along the back road between Ngaruawahia and Otorohanga. Sweet as... For the benefit of Aussie readers - who are probably still trying to pronounce 'Pirongia' - it's about two hours south of Auckland... Google Maps is your friend.

Why on earth are we talking about a small rural golf course with a membership of no more than a few hundred? Well, just ask one of New Zealand's most experienced golf course superintendents John Spraggs, for it was there that his journey in golf began some five decades ago. It's a world away from where he finds himself now - as course superintendent of Royal Wellington Golf Club, one of New Zealand's most exclusive and historic establishments - but Pirongia still holds a special place in the heart of this proud 'Mooloo' man.

A native of Te Awamutu - again, for the benefit of Aussie readers, Te Awamutu is famous as being the home town of Tim and Neil Finn, of Split Enz



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROYAL WELLINGTON GOLF CLUB ▶

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7



◀ The approach to Royal Wellington's closing hole. As part of the recent remodelling, 18 greens and tee complexes were built, while the bunkers and surrounds were significantly reworked to provide a more rustic natural look

and Crowded House fame – Spraggs grew up on the family dairy farm. The Waikato region, of which Te Awamutu is part of, is renowned as one of New Zealand's prime intensive agricultural districts and, just like his father and grandfather before, by the age of 10 Spraggs was up at the crack of dawn every day milking cows.

As a kid growing up in rural Waikato in the 1960s and 1970s you either played rugby union or you played rugby union. If you didn't play rugby union, well, that simply wasn't an option. Fortunately for Spraggs, he was blessed with tall genes and was a perfect specimen to play lock forward. For much of his teenage years he could be found emulating All Black heroes of the day, such as the legendary Colin 'Pinetree' Meads, and schooling himself in the dark art of tight five politics. However, it was another sport that would grab Spraggs' attention.

His father was a regular at Pirongia Golf Club and was on the committee there. When the young Spraggs wasn't working on the dairy farm or playing rugby, he was with his dad at the golf club helping out. In those days Pirongia Golf Club was maintained by an efficient and loyal flock of sheep and one of Spraggs' earliest and fondest memories of golf is erecting and pulling down the protective fences to keep the sheep off the greens.

Spraggs fell in love with the game of golf and quickly became a good player, but it never occurred

to him to work on a golf course. He was destined for a life on the farm until one of his childhood mates got a job as a greenkeeper at a golf course in Hamilton, about 30 minutes north of Te Awamutu. It just so happened that at the same time – we are talking 1978 here – a position came up at Hamilton Golf Club under head greenkeeper Laurie Stubbing. Spraggs was put on and spent four years there and knew he had found his calling.

A BIT OF LUCK, A BIT OF PLANNING

With a solid grounding under Stubbing, Spraggs then dipped his toe in the water and headed to New Plymouth in 1982 to take on his first superintendent gig at Westown Golf Club. He was just into his 20s and couldn't have picked a better spot. The Taranaki region's fertile soils are perfect for growing turf and to boot he had one of New Zealand's foremost superintendents, Nigel Lloyd, working down the road at Inglewood Golf Club. Lloyd, who later in his career was bestowed NZGCSA life membership, was a constant source of advice and counsel for the fledgling superintendent.

Off the course it was also a life-changing move as no sooner had he arrived there Spraggs met his wife-to-be Denise. Their honeymoon was spent at the picturesque seaside township of Mt Maunganui, on the east coast of the North Island, and six months later, in 1985, Spraggs found himself as course superintendent at the 'Mount' and a week out from hosting his first New Zealand PGA Championship.

Spraggs would go on to spend seven enjoyable years at Mt Maunganui, transforming the layout through a significant tree removal programme. It was also a great upbringing for sons Mark and Brendan who were born during his time there. However, Spraggs then did something that perplexed many of his peers – he moved to Wellington and a role as superintendent at Hutt Golf Club in the Hutt Valley.

"A lot of people thought I was mad," laughs Spraggs, who landed there in 1992. "Why would you leave the Mount to live in Wellington, especially when we had a great operation, a great climate and a great lifestyle? But I semi-planned it I guess.

"I had always loved Royal Wellington from when I first saw the place back in the late 1970s. I have a passion for the game and its traditions and Royal Wellington had always appealed to me. I fell in love with the landscape, the setting and the traditions of the club and I knew that I had to get closer if I was to ever get a chance of one day working there.

"I guess I took a conscious step sideways, or maybe even backwards, by going to the Hutt Golf Club. Don't get me wrong, it was still a really good job. It was an A-grade course, but it was in Wellington and a lot of my peers questioned my decision. But I knew if I could produce the surfaces at Hutt Golf Club, then that would put me in good stead if the Royal Wellington job ever came up."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

John Spraggs, pictured right during last year's Asia Pacific Amateur Championship, has notched up a career that has spanned four decades, including the past 13 as course manager at Royal Wellington



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

And 13 years later, in 2005, it finally did. With the club looking for a different direction, Royal Wellington advertised for a new course manager and Spraggs, a board member of the NZGCSA at the time, duly found himself appointed to the role he had for so long coveted. Such a role at one of New Zealand's most prestigious clubs rarely comes around and Spraggs found himself vying for it alongside many of his close friends. But it was ultimately his and he was over the moon.

By no means, however, was his time at Hutt Golf Club just spent idly waiting for the Royal Wellington job to come up. During his tenure there he built six new greens, a number of bunker and tee complexes and on nine occasions reinstated the course after major floods. But moving 10km up the Hutt Valley to Royal Wellington, it opened up a new chapter

for Spraggs, one that has proved to be perhaps the most productive and rewarding of his career.

ROYAL REMODEL

Spraggs has achieved much over his four-decade turf management career but none probably quite as big as the remodelling of Royal Wellington between 2011 and 2013. When Spraggs arrived at the club six years earlier, it was all set to embark on master plan works to transform the 27-hole parkland style course which then comprised a championship 18 and short 'inner nine' (the inner nine was constructed when the club acquired additional land in the 1970s).

Club captain of the time Peter Cutfield, who is now the current day president, was a key driver behind the redevelopment and with Spraggs on board entrusted him with shortlisting architect submissions. The club eventually appointed Michael Clayton whose layout showed a lot of promise. However, as things progressed, the members balked at the Australian's desire to remove a large number of trees and it was eventually thrown out.

Redevelopment plans were shelved for the next couple of years, but that all changed when, somewhat ironically, the club milled a 15 hectare stand of maturing pine forest on the club's river boundary. As well as netting the club a tidy financial gain, it opened up a valuable track of land and new vistas which provided impetus for getting the redevelopment back on the agenda. The club duly engaged the services of Turner Macpherson Golf Design, headed by former Kiwi pro golfer Greg Turner, to come up with a new masterplan, which was ultimately approved by the members.

Starting on 1 February 2011, the redevelopment would see the construction of four new holes (4, 5, 7 and 14) on the cleared land. Those four new holes enabled the existing front nine and the short inner nine holes to be reworked and together they formed the new championship 18, what is now known as the 'Heretaunga' course (named after the suburb where the course resides). The existing back nine was left untouched and is now known as the 'Terrace' nine.

It was a massive undertaking and the Royal Wellington team played a significant role throughout the redevelopment, in addition to maintaining 18 holes of golf for play at all times. They prepped the site for contractors TIC Projects who undertook the bulk earthworks and final shaping. They then carried out the final rake and prep before seeding all of the new surfaces.

In total, including the four new holes, 18 new greens and tee complexes were reconstructed. The greens were constructed using a slightly modified USGA spec – 300mm sand profile overlaying a 100mm deep 6mm-chip drainage carpet with porous pipe trenched into the base. A 2.0mm sand (with no amendments) was sourced just south of Auckland and railed down. All bunkers were reconstructed with fescues around the lips and tongues providing a wonderful rugged natural look.

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

You'd be hard pressed to find someone more passionate about the game of golf than Royal Wellington Golf Club superintendent John Spraggs. Over a career that has already stretched more than four decades, the 57-year-old has prepped courses for numerous major tournaments, overseen significant course remodelling projects and served an incredible 21 years on the executive of the NZGCSA.

And it's not just in turf management where Spraggs has carved himself a unique niche. For the past 10 years, Spraggs has been on New Zealand Golf's men's teams selection panel and will shortly name his fifth Eisenhower Trophy team to represent the Silver Fern at the 2018 World Amateur Teams Championship in Ireland this August.

In addition to his national role, Spraggs is also convener of the selection panel for Wellington Golf, where he is responsible for overseeing all of the province's representative golf teams. He has been convenor for the past four years and come the Toro Interprovincial Golf Series, New Zealand's primary amateur teams competition, Spraggs will be on the bag for one of Wellington's leading amateurs. As Spraggs says, such roles are his way of giving back to the grass roots of golf and to a game which has given him so much over the years.

Despite immersing himself in all facets of golf, ask Spraggs what has been one of the more rewarding aspects of his journey to date and it has been seeing his three sons – Mark, Brendan and Matthew

– all follow in his footsteps and forge successful careers as superintendents and greenkeepers.

Indeed, the Spraggs name is now synonymous in greenkeeping circles on both sides of the Tasman. Eldest son Mark, who trained as an apprentice under his father while he was at Hutt Golf Club, is currently superintendent at Club Taree on the NSW Mid North Coast. Middle son Brendan joined Royal Wellington as an apprentice shortly after dad started his tenure as course manager and is now one of his qualified staff there.

And youngest son Matthew, arguably the best golfer of the lot, completed his apprenticeship at Boulcott Heritage Farm Golf Club (formerly Hutt Golf Club) and 18 months ago took on his first superintendent posting at Karori Golf Club, which resides over the hills to the west of the Wellington CBD.

"It was never supposed to be a dynasty," laughs Spraggs when asked if he planned it like that. "I guess the boys got the golf bug too and love the game just as much as I do. I guess it was almost a logical progression for them to follow into the industry given that I was always heavily involved in the golf clubs I worked for. I even trained a couple of them!"

"They all play the game very well and we are super competitive when we get together. It's great to reconnect when you are walking the fairways with them and invariably the discussions will turn to turf. They have an inquisitive nature, just like their old man, and I couldn't be more proud of what they have all achieved."

A BENT FOR CHANGE

From an agronomic perspective, the redevelopment afforded Spraggs the opportunity to change turf varieties on Royal Wellington's greens and, as it transpired, tees. As Spraggs quips, New Zealand is 'Poa central' and although they were once Egmont browntop, over time Royal Wellington's greens had reverted to *Poa annua*.

Always the innovator and willing to give things a crack, Spraggs had a nagging desire for Royal Wellington's surfaces to have a point of difference. As a keen golfer himself, he wanted to be able to provide his members with the superior putting surfaces that creeping bentgrass afforded and thus began a quest to find a suitable variety. After plenty of searching and trial work he found it – T1.

The T1 option came about after Spraggs ventured to the US in 2009 while his eldest son Mark was interning at Pine Valley. While there he visited a number of clubs, among them Merion and Baltusrol, and discussed T1's potential with superintendents Matt Schafer and Mark Kuhns. At the time a number of courses were overseeding T1 on their tee boxes, while Kuhns had interseeded T1 on the Upper Course at Baltusrol with impressive results.

Backed up by some promising trial data which had demonstrated the T1's ability to make noticeable visible gains against *Poa*, once back home Spraggs set up some trial plots. Over a two-year period prior to the redevelopment he put it through its paces and discovered it thrived under local conditions. T1 would end up being used across both greens and tees as part of the redevelopment, with Royal Wellington becoming the first course in New Zealand to use the variety to such an extent.

"Six years on and we have absolutely no regrets," says Spraggs of his decision to go with T1. "We will always have our battles with *Poa annua* here – it's *Poa central* – but the T1 continues to perform well and is holding its own with a little help from paclobutrazol. We have about 20-30 per cent *Poa*, but we do make inroads into it during the summer.



The problem we have is that our fairways are 80-90 per cent *Poa*, but we have just embarked on a long-term programme to hopefully reduce the invasion."

Indeed, starting this March Spraggs kicked off an ambitious project to convert the Royal Wellington fairways to colonial bentgrass. Maintaining a consistent surface on the fairways has become increasingly challenging in a warming climate, especially in summer, and it's Spraggs' desire to have a surface that will stand up better, in addition to addressing the issue of *Poa* ingress onto the greens.

Last summer Spraggs let the *Poa* in the fairways melt out before drill and drop seeding colonial bentgrass into those voids before the *Poa* had a chance to regenerate. This September he'll start regular herbicide treatments to knock more *Poa* out and continue seeding. Spraggs is under no illusions it will be a lengthy process, but is hopeful that in five years' time the club will have far more manageable, and consistent, fairways during summer.

INTENSIVE REGIMES

The quest to continually refine and improve the playing surfaces, along with the changes to the course via the redevelopment, has certainly sparked a renaissance of sorts for Royal Wellington. Fifteen

During his tenure as course manager, Spraggs has seen player rounds at Royal Wellington increase to between 35,000 and 40,000 a year from just 5000 15 years ago



As part of the redevelopment, the Royal Wellington greens were converted from *Poa annua* to T1 creeping bentgrass. Pictured is the 5th hole which was one of the four new holes constructed



The beautiful natural setting of Royal Wellington's par three 8th, the shortest hole on the card



Royal Wellington hosted the 2017 Asia Pacific Amateur Championship last October

Spraggs has just embarked on a major five-year project to convert the Royal Wellington fairways from *Poa annua* to colonial bentgrass. Pictured is the 10th



years ago the club was lucky to register 5000 rounds of golf per year, with members simply able to turn up and walk straight on to the first tee. All that has changed and the club now pushes through between 35,000 and 40,000 rounds per annum.

Always a golfer, Spraggs is delighted to see such numbers enjoying the course, but it does place added pressure on his maintenance regimes. Royal Wellington is one of the few courses in NZ which walk-mows greens, tees, collars and approaches (greens are either cut or rolled every day) and with a crew of just 12 it is often quite the exercise.

While such maintenance regimes are exacting and befitting the status of a club such as Royal Wellington, they aren't a patch on renovation practices. With heavy, silty clay soils which easily wet up in winter, combined with cool-season turf varieties which love to thatch up, Spraggs employs what can only be described as an aggressive aeration programme.

"It's pretty intensive," explains Spraggs. "We core the greens three times a year – April, September and December – with 5/8" hollow tines and between April and September will also put some 1/4" solids across to vent the surface and keep them breathing. On top of that is frequent sand topdressing and dusting every two to three weeks during the summer and every three to four weeks in the cooler months.

"We pedestrian core the fairways four times a year and the first cut of rough twice a year. We also have a large Verti-Drain which we put across the fairways twice a year. And the tees are cored three times a year. It sounds like a lot, and it is, but it's the only way we can keep the porosity levels up in this place and keep the organic matter levels manageable. That's the downside of having wall-to-wall cool-season grasses – they develop a lot of thatch pretty quick.

"As part of the fairway conversion we are also embarking on high applications of gypsum to improve the soil structure. We have 32 tonnes arriving the second week of June so hopefully it'll be gone by the time the AGCSA tournament arrives!"

AUSSIE INVASION

Spraggs has hosted numerous tournaments during his long career – a couple of NZ PGA Championships, NZ Amateur Championships and last October's Asia Pacific Amateur Championship – but nothing quite as unique as preparing his course for 108 fellow superintendents and an 'Australian' national championship. Yet come 24 June, Royal Wellington will add that slightly quirky fact to its history books when it becomes the first overseas course to host the Toro AGCSA Golf Championship.

Spraggs, ever the consummate host, is looking forward immensely to having his trans-Tasman counterparts walk his patch of turf, but is even more excited about the fact that the Australian and New Zealand industries are uniting in the days following for the inaugural Australasian Turfgrass Conference.

"I'm so happy that the conference is coming to New Zealand," says Spraggs, who was on the NZGCSA board for 21 years. "I remember having the discussion in the early days when I was on the NZ board with the likes of Euan Laird, Doug Robinson and Peter Frewin. We've been trying to get this to happen for so long and I am just absolutely thrilled it's now happening. It's so exciting and I'm sure it'll be an eye-opener for all those who haven't been to New Zealand before. I am sure they will love it."

And what tips does Spraggs have for those set to tee it up at Royal Wellington? "Well, apart from being able swing a club wearing three jackets, it's pretty simple – keep it on the short stuff. There's plenty of fairway, nothing is hidden and it won't be tricked up – it'll play as it plays. The hole to watch out for is the short par four 14th, a lovely golf hole which plays across a wetland. A well-positioned laid out drive is the perfect option there.

"They'll have a lot of fun. I'm hoping we'll have a reasonably calm day – our windy season is September through to December – but you can guarantee it'll be cool. We had a southerly come through the other day (first week of June) and the wind chill factor was minus 1. I'm sure the boys will figure that out pretty quick. Above all, I hope they enjoy the walk and hope they all bring their winter-weight golf shoes!" 🍷