

Northern Golf Club  
assistant superintendent  
Mick Pearce was  
one of five Australian  
greenkeepers to volunteer  
at the recent 115th US  
Open at Chambers Bay.  
The unique public access  
course courted plenty  
of controversy during  
the week but ultimately  
provided yet another  
dramatic chapter in Major  
history.

The dramatic undulations of  
Chambers Bay's 18th green

PHOTOS: MICK PEARCE, IDRIS EVANS AND STEPHEN MALLYON



# Open slather

**A**fter experiencing the coldest start to winter in Melbourne for more than 20 years in early June, I was somewhat happy to be boarding a plane bound for the warmer climate of Seattle to work at the 115th US Open at Chambers Bay. This would be a great opportunity to not only gain tournament experience, knowledge and meet new people, but also renew old acquaintances from when I volunteered at the 2012 US Open held at The Olympic Club in San Francisco.

The 2015 US Open was to be a significant event. It was the first time in 120 years that a US Open was to be held on a course in the Pacific Northwest and on a links style golf course. It was also just the third time in the event's history that it had been held on a municipal golf course, following the likes of Bethpage Black and Torrey Pines.

Chambers Bay itself was designed by Robert Trent-Jones Jnr and was officially opened in 2007. It is routed through a dramatic former sand and gravel quarry which supplied rootzone sand for most of the golf courses in the Pacific Northwest as well as

Canada. The mining scars are still visible on the hills that surround the course and make for a very unique landscape, especially for a course hosting a US Open.

The University of Puget Sound, or UPS as the locals call it, was to be our home for the week of the Open. With students on summer break, the Chambers Bay organisation was able to secure the dorms which meant an easy 20 minute bus ride to the course. Most of the volunteers were paired two to a room and I was fortunate to share with Kolby Beaton, assistant superintendent from Pinebrook Golf and Country Club in Calgary, Canada.

Upon arriving at the accommodation and settling in, I met five fellow greenkeepers who were also staying in the dorm. As it transpired they held positions at Chambers Bay and were staying in the dorms for convenience, as travel was a nightmare due to traffic congestion.

During our discussions they mentioned that over the previous fortnight the course had experienced some unseasonal hot weather which had caused the greens and fairways to dry out quicker than expected. This meant that most of the crew were carrying out hand watering duties around the clock. The weather for the week leading up to the tournament had settled thankfully with temperatures ranging between a comfortable 22-27°C.

It was interesting listening to them as this was their first US Open and you could tell they were very excited given it was also the first time that an event of this stature was being held in this area. Their excitement was akin to how I felt when I worked at The Olympic Club for my first US Open.







Opened in 2007, 2015 US Open host course Chambers Bay was crafted out of a former sand quarry which makes for a unique landscape. Pictured in the foreground is the tee complex on the 9th which sits 100 feet above the green



Looking down on the 1st (left) and 10th (right) holes at Chambers Bay. The 1st, along with the 18th, were able to be switched between par fours and fives depending on the daily conditions

I was one of five volunteers from Australia and was joined by Stephen Mallyon (assistant superintendent, The Lakes Golf Club, NSW, who also volunteered in 2012), Dean Lenertz (assistant superintendent, NSW Golf Club, NSW), Idris Evans (superintendent, Western Australian Golf Club, WA) and Nathan Arnett (superintendent Traralgon Golf Club, Vic).

## DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE

When I applied for an Open volunteer position I looked at photographs of Chambers Bay and quickly formed the opinion that it was a very interesting layout. Nothing, however, could quite prepare me for actually stepping foot on site. Photos of the course simply do not do it justice. It is a phenomenal piece of land and the elevation changes on some holes have to be seen to be believed. It's certainly a greenkeeper's heaven but golfer's nightmare.

On Sunday afternoon, the agronomy contingent that consisted of 120 volunteers, representing 15 states of the US and 11 countries, along with the 28 permanent ground staff assembled in a large marquee. We were all greeted by Josh Lewis who has been superintendent at Chambers Bay for the past five years and is a former first assistant at Bandon Dunes.

Josh introduced the key personnel involved in the organising of the event. Chambers Bay was selected to host the US Open just six months after the course had been officially opened on 14 August 2007. Josh then went on to give a rundown of the course itself which consists of 1.45 hectares of greens (supposedly the largest green area of

any US Open), 3.5ha of tee complexes, 14.3ha of fairways and an impressive 7.5ha of bunker and waste land areas. The course is wall-to-wall fescue with the greens, fairway and tees being a mixture of Chewings and creeping red fescues and the rough consisting of sheeps and hard fescues.

After hosting the 2010 US Amateur Championship, considered a test run for the Open, the course underwent a number of changes with select greens renovated and in some cases re-seeded. Other changes encompassed improvements to a number of approaches, extensive bunker work and the construction of new championship tee complexes to add length to the course.

Once the formalities were over, all the volunteers received their uniforms for the week and were assigned their tasks. Then we were taken out onto

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The Australian volunteer contingent at the 2015 US Open (from left) Mick Pearce, Dean Lenertz, Stephen Mallyon, Idris Evans and Nathan Arnett

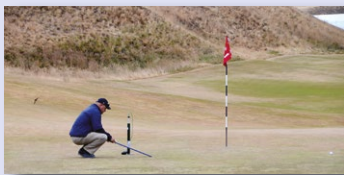




# 'A WORLD CLASS SURFACE, NOT A WORLD CLASS COLOUR'



A number of Chambers Bay's fescue greens, particularly those closest to Puget Sound, had significant populations of *Poa annua*



The undulating Chambers Bay greens stimped between 11-11.5 feet during the four rounds of the Open

Tee and hole locations were GPS'd ahead of each round for future reference



"Putting on broccoli" and "simply the worst most disgraceful surface I have ever seen on any tour in all the years I have played". Pretty harsh! Such comments from the likes of Henrik Stenson and Ian Poulter certainly grabbed world-wide headlines during and after the 2015 US Open held at Chambers Bay, placing the USGA in the firing line over the course set up and condition of the greens.

For Idris Evans (Western Australian Golf Club, WA), Stephen Mallyon (The Lakes Golf Club, NSW) and Nathan Arnett (Traralgon Golf Club, Vic) who were among the five Aussie volunteers present for the week, it was certainly an eye-opener and one experience they won't forget. ATM asked them for their impressions of the week:

## STEPHEN MALLYON

"Despite comments like Poulter's on social media, Josh and his team had thoughts quite the opposite. They were all happy with the surfaces provided. I asked Josh personally of his thoughts and he said 'We are here to provide a world class surface, not a world class colour. The surfaces we have provided are firm and true, it's just not the look that everyone is used to. I couldn't be happier.'

"I have to agree with Josh. The bad comments about the course seemed to only come from the players shooting over par. The players shooting under par were raving about the course.

"There was a lot of *Poa annua* present on the surface, obviously, though every green was smooth and the balls all rolled true. I was lucky enough to be on a couple of the greens when the USGA were making all their measurements (stimp, Clegg, smoothness and trueness), all of which fell within the desired parameters.

"An interesting stat was that the 2015 US Open had a lower putts per round average than the previous three US Opens. I feel it was the colour and the mountainous greens that had the players too scared to play attacking golf.

"My overall impression of Chambers Bay is one of amazement – the way the fairways run into the greens with only a minor difference in the height of cut and the undulations of the greens, which, coming from The Lakes, I thought I would be used to, but some of those slopes were incredible."

## NATHAN ARNETT

"With everyone being on social media the staff and volunteers certainly knew the greens were a talking point among the golfers. It was no secret that a couple of the greens probably weren't where they needed to be in terms of presentation, but overall I believe the greens were certainly a fair test. With Chambers Bay being a public golf course and only closing three weeks prior to the Open it was always going to be a tough task keeping wear areas to a minimum (on greens) as high numbers poured through the gates in the lead-up.

"In terms of the course as a whole, I really enjoyed the layout. The elevations were spectacular and there is no way that TV could capture just how dramatic they were. The massive waste areas were a sight to see and would certainly be very time consuming from a maintenance perspective.

"Highlight of the week, aside from the unlimited ice creams in the volunteer tent, was being made to feel very welcomed and very much part of the maintenance team. Viewing 20 fairway mowers head down in the same direction is also a sight that never gets old."

## IDRIS EVANS

"It is difficult to comment on the green surfaces when I was only there for a week without knowing the history of the course. Clearly the appearance was a surprise given the enormity of the event and knowing the worldwide exposure and scrutiny they would be under. However, appearance aside they rolled quite well and statistics show that putts/GIR at Chambers Bay were in fact similar to the last two US Opens. I do believe it was a fair test but obviously an extremely difficult one with the dry hard surface the USGA wanted.

"As for the pros, these guys are given perfect conditions week in week out and are looking for an excuse if their performance doesn't meet expectations. The USGA has control of course set up and for the US Open like a particularly firm and fast golf course and look for a modest total winning the event. These conditions don't always go well for course appearance and playability.

"Overall I thought the Chambers Bay course was amazing. I'm a big fan of golf courses that are natural and while it's new it looks like it has been there forever. The bunkering and green complexes stood out along with the massive elevation changes.

"I guess the one thing I took away was that course preparation is the same everywhere, just for these events it's on a grander scale. Obviously resources enable it to be completed in a short time and allow many tasks to be taken on manually, like hand mowing, watering and bunker raking. The interaction with other superintendents was great and to find out the industry is the same worldwide in that we are all fighting the same battle for perfection."

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the course to familiarise ourselves with the dramatic undulating layout.

What took everyone by surprise was just how much change in elevation there was throughout the course. The highest point is the 14th green at 69 metres above sea level with the lowest point being the 17th green at just 8.8m. With the additional championship tees the course had the potential to play 7900 yards (7223m) for the week with a par of 70.

Every hole at Chambers Bay has its own unique features and names to boot:

- 1st (Puget Sound) – can play from 453m to 546m as either a par four or par five;
- 4th (Hazard's Ascent, 452m) – long uphill par four with a massive wasteland on the right;
- 7th (Humpback, 464m) – another long par four with elevation changes and large bunkering;
- 8th (High Road, 561m) – par five with a left to right sloping fairway;
- 9th (Olympus, 204m) – downhill par three with two tee locations (high and low – the high tee is perched 100 feet above the green) which dramatically change the aspect of the hole;
- 10th (High Dunes, 389m) – par four which has the two largest sand dunes on the course situated either side of the green;
- 12th (The Narrows, 284m) – a drivable uphill par four, but boasting a wildly sloping green;



- 15th (Lone Fir) – this par three can play anywhere from 152m to 224m due to multiple tee locations. Also boasts a great bunker complex which surrounds the green area with the only tree on the property – a 50-foot Douglas Fir – located in the background ;
- 16th (Beached, 386m) – par four with bunkering that runs the entire length of the right side of the fairway. A risk/reward driving hole that also has the smallest and one of the most undulating greens on the course;
- 18th (Tacoma) – can play from 480m to 552m as either a par four or par five with bunkering complexes that frame the undulating fairway. Also boasts a 10 foot deep pot bunker (known as Chambers Basement) located 109 metres from an extremely undulating green.

Depending on the conditions of the day the USGA were able to alternate the pars on the 1st and

The Lakes assistant Stephen Mallyon in the 10 foot deep Chambers Basement pot bunker on the 18th and (below) with US Open winner Jordan Spieth



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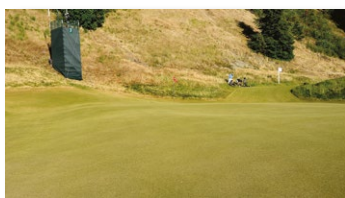


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◀ The fortnight leading up to the Open was unseasonably warm with hand watering a priority. Pictured is the 2nd



Chambers Bay is wall to wall fescue with the greens, fairways and tees a mix of Chewings and creeping red fescues. Pictured is the 7th green



The 9th green pictured from the final round low tee location

A shot of the dramatic setting coming up 18



18th, with the opening hole playing as a par four for rounds one, three and four and as a par five in the second. For the second round the 1st played 593 yards while for the final round it measured just 443 yards. Similarly, the 18th stretched to 617 yards for the opening round and was back to 514 yards the following round. Overall yardages across the four days fluctuated from a maximum of 7637 in round two and 7384 in the final round which is where all the drama would eventually unfold.

Chambers Bay is certainly a course that requires plenty of imagination, skill and a sense of humour and it quickly became apparent on our first wander around that it was going to be a brutal test, especially if the wind got up. It was also an arduous prospect for the spectators and due to the undulating nature of the site the USGA installed more grandstands to make it easier for them to watch the action.

## OPEN PREPS

As with any major tournament there was no shortage of equipment at Josh's disposal. The Open fleet included:

- 28 Toro Reelmaster 3550-D fairway mowers;
- 10 Toro Greenmaster 3420 Tri-flex hybrid mowers;
- 18 Toro Greensmaster Flex 2100 walk-behinds with trailers;
- 7 Toro GreensPro 1240 rollers;
- 2 Toro SandPro 2040-Z bunker rakes;
- 46 Toro MDX Workman utilities; and
- 10 EZGO Express S6 carts.

Mowing heights for the greens started out at 0.200" (5.08mm) four weeks out from the tournament, and gradually dropped to 0.170" (4.3mm) prior to the practice days. Fairway and tee heights were 0.500" (12.7mm), green surrounds 0.300" (7.6mm) and rough 4.5" (114mm).

All volunteers were assigned various tasks with Stephen and I cutting fairways and tees, Idris and Dean cutting green surrounds and Nathan GPS'ing tee and hole locations. Preparations for the mornings and afternoons included:

- **Morning shift:** Cutting fairways, greens, tees, green surrounds and fairway clean-up; rolling greens; bunker maintenance; divotting and smoothing off and dew whipping rough; changing holes and markers; and hand watering hot spots on fairways.
- **Afternoon shift:** Consisted of bunker maintenance; practice facility clean-up; divotting fairways and tees; hand watering fairway and green hotspots; green maintenance which consisted of repairing pitch marks and removing any small rocks from the green that had come from the bunkers.

Our days would start when the buses came to UPS to transport us to the maintenance facility at 3am. There we were briefed for the day's preparations and were out on course by 4am with the morning shift completed by 8.30am. The afternoon shift started at either 6pm (practice rounds) or 6.30pm (tournament rounds). This shift finished at 9.30pm.

With the opening round of the tournament completed without issue, the greens were checked, as they were after each round, for firmness as well as moisture. The greens were very firm and running at 11 to 11.5 feet and the weather played its part by providing warm sunny days with a light sea breeze coming in during the afternoon.

The remainder of the tournament went off without a hitch aside from a few comments from some players about the course condition and set up. While the course had clearly come out on top during the first three rounds, the final day saw a battle royal coming down the stretch. With two holes remaining we were all thinking there was going to be a play-off only to watch Dustin Johnson three-putt the last to hand the title to Jordan Spieth.

There were numerous highlights from the Open but the one thing that will always stay with me was that first impression upon seeing the course for the first time. It rates as one of the most spectacular courses I have ever seen. This was also a trip during which I learnt new techniques, broadened by turf management knowledge in terms of managing fescues as well as meeting people from all parts of the world who share a passion for greenkeeping and golf course management. To be able to listen to their experiences, their ideas and share our collective knowledge while being part of one of the game's great tournaments was tremendous and something I will always cherish. 🌱