

## TOURNAMENTS

*Easterly winds gusting up to 70kph buffeted the Beach Course during the final round of the 2025 Vic Open, with the final men's group taking nearly six hours to complete their round*

# Beach blast

*It was a brutal conclusion to the 2025 Vic Open at 13th Beach Golf Links in February, causing more than a few headaches for both players and greenkeepers writes Brett Robinson.*

Steven Hewitt is well-schooled in the weather extremes that come with managing a golf course on the windswept Victorian coastline. Having been custodian of 13th Beach Golf Links on the Bellarine Peninsula coming up 25 years this November, the VGCSA life member has pretty much experienced everything the weather can throw at his course. But as they say in the turf caper you never stop learning and so was the case on the final day of the 2025 Vic Open in early February.

The tournament, which pioneered the mixed gender competition format and become a staple of the men's and women's Australasian tours, has been played across 13th Beach's two championship courses (Beach and Creek) since 2013. Having overseen all 12 events since, Hewitt can't recall one that hasn't been impacted by the weather in some form or other, whether during the lead-in or tournament week itself.

You can count on one hand the number of days the wind doesn't blow at 13th Beach and with a number of the Beach Course holes just a few hundred meters from the ocean it can be a constant battle, especially when it comes to irrigation uniformity and spraying.

At the start of the week of this year's Vic Open, the forecast was for increasing winds heading into the weekend. Hewitt was more than ready for it, but with a quarter century experience of the prevailing conditions under his belt he had an inkling they were in for something a bit different this time around.

Having successfully navigated the first three rounds – the opening two rounds are played across both courses before the final two rounds are contested solely on the Beach Course – rare easterly winds gusting up to 70 kilometres per hour would buffet the layout for the majority of the final round. As the main photo opposite graphically shows, flagsticks were bent sideways as ferrules were tested to their engineered limits, while balls moved around on the most exposed greens and even fairways.

To say that the final round was a slog would be an understatement. It was more a brutal war of attrition in some of the most challenging conditions seen on either a PGA Tour of Australasia or WPGA Tour event in years. Indeed, the winds literally blew the men's scoring average for Sunday to 76.5 shots and women's to just under 80.

Eventual men's winner Josh Geary, who began Sunday at 19-under and four shots clear after a superb 4-under third round,

would hold on grimly to that margin despite shedding shots in a six-over final round of 78. Luckily for him he wasn't alone, with the rest of the contenders capitulating in the blustery conditions. Three players – Western Australian Connor McKinney and Kiwi duo Kerry Mountcastle and Michael Hendry who had finished their rounds hours earlier – would end up finishing second and tied third as the top of the leaderboard was literally blown apart. One of those tied for third and playing in the final group alongside Geary was Austin Bautista who signed for a 79.

"It's the hardest round of golf I've had to play," Geary told media after putting out on the 72nd hole. "It's hard enough trying to close out a tournament, let alone in those conditions which meant literally you can make any score from anywhere. If you'd asked me if I shot 78 tomorrow if I'd still have a four-shot margin, I'd tell you you're dreaming, but that's just how hard it was."

It was the same for the women. Su Oh started the final round seven shots adrift in a tie for 10th and carded a 2-over 74 to finish at even par. By the time she had finished her round she was in a tie for second, three off the lead. She then had to wait nearly two hours as the final group, containing Madoka Kimura and Shina Kanazawa, ground their way around the wind-affected layout. The Japanese duo had entered the final round heading the field, but ended up posting 83 (11-over) and 80 (8-over) respectively to finish third and second behind a shocked Oh who prevailed by a single shot.

While it was a grind for the players, it was an equally tense end to the tournament for Hewitt and his crew who had presented the two courses in fantastic condition all week. The tension started creeping in late on Saturday when Hewitt had a meeting with tournament director Trevor Herden about course set up for the final round. While the windy conditions had been manageable to that point, the updated forecast for Sunday was grim and necessitated a number of changes to their preparations.

"I was mindful of the wind prediction for Sunday a few days out, knowing we would have to potentially change our plans," explains Hewitt, a past president of the VGCSA. "We were going to cut the exposed greens on tournament holes 2 and 7 Saturday evening and cut the rest Sunday morning. While not ideal in terms of consistency, it was one of the options we were considering."

"In the end we decided not to cut greens at all – not Saturday night, not Sunday morning – and to water them with hand held hoses to get some moisture into them. We watered the green surrounds/aprons as required on the Saturday evening and watered greens only Sunday morning. The greens stimped at 10' that morning and all we could then do was to see if we'd get through the day."

Golf Australia and PGA of Australia officials set up the final round pin placements to factor in the wind but also to retain the challenge. Hewitt says the officials did a great job to find that balance and the thought among them all was that once the golfers got through tournament hole 7, a 100m par three which boasts a small green atop an exposed sand dune (the Beach Course's usual 16th), that the rest of the course would stand up well to the wind. That wasn't to be the case.

With the final men's group playing the 8th, balls started moving on the green which led them to query officials whether play should be suspended. After more than 20 minutes of waiting (and gesticulating) they were instructed by PGA official Graeme Scott to play on. As commentator Nick O'Hern noted pointedly on the TV broadcast – "I've seen worse".

For the rest of the round balls were shifting on greens from strong gusts, while some were even moving on fairways in exposed areas. However, balls never rolled off greens, just shifted, which did make for some understandably tentative putting. As a testimony to how tough the conditions were, it took the last men's group nearly six hours to complete their round.



*The 13th Beach tournament crew that prepared the two courses for the 12th hosting of the Vic Open. Superintendent Steven Hewitt is second from left*





*Cooper Stephens triplex cuts greens. Due to the strong winds on Sunday, the Beach Course greens weren't cut ahead of the final round. Throughout the week they were maintained at 3mm*

"The wind was brutal and I have never experienced anything like it from an easterly before," reflects Hewitt. "Persistent easterlies for weeks used to be quite common in the summer, but we haven't experienced them for many years now, which is strange, and certainly never that strong. That one-off strong easterly is not common, nor expected.

"It certainly blew sand in different areas than what we're used to from the normal southwesterlies we get that can blow hard. At the start of the week we had 27mm of rain and as it turned out having that bit of extra moisture in the profile assisted us in keeping the course playable on the Sunday.

"Working the Monday morning after the tournament, when we would normally roll greens for members to play the tournament course, my assistant and I chose to handwater

greens over both courses again instead and witnessed the rectification work required to reinstate the bunkers after the wind erosion damage from the Sunday. It was a long couple days for the crew who spent until Thursday cleaning the place up."

**DIALLING IN**

The challenging Sunday conditions belied what Hewitt describes as an otherwise good lead-in to this year's tournament. 13th Beach is five years into a six-year Course Improvement Program (CIP) under the guidance of architect Darius Oliver, with further works progressing in the 12 months between tournaments.

The CIP has primarily focussed on bunker rationalisation across both courses. The aim has been to keep the same challenge for golfers but reduce the amount of bunkers and

area of sand that Hewitt and his crew maintain. The changes to date have had the desired result, with bunker maintenance much more manageable and enabling the crew to present them and the many wasteland areas in better condition, especially come the tournament. In years past the crew would barely have enough time to get in the wasteland areas to clean them up, whereas this time around they had a good fortnight to concentrate on them before the tournament teed off.

Like most Victorian superintendents, Hewitt was grateful for a more normal summer this year, with the humidity of past seasons thankfully gone. The turf surfaces made it through the dry summer conditions well and handled the increased number of rounds that the facility experiences due to it being a popular holiday destination over the summer.

"We set the playing surfaces up for the Christmas period and continued with that level of presentation through until the Vic Open," explains Hewitt. "We do not over-fertilise to create a bright green golf course, rather we just maintain the natural links appearance for the tournament which is in keeping with our 12-month maintenance strategy.

"In the lead-up we dusted greens on both courses the same week so as to achieve the same green speeds for the tournament. Our preventative fungicide applications were timed well, as was our last fertiliser application on greens. We had the couch surfaces under regulation (Primo), especially the Creek Course fairways, which meant our mowing schedules were manageable."

While it was the wind that made the headlines on the weekend of the tournament, the Sunday before it was the rain which Hewitt was having to contend with. A thunderstorm with strong westerly winds dumped 27mm of rain on the course, continuing a run of similar storm events impacting past tournaments (Hewitt reckons over half of the Opens they've held have copped damage from storm activity).

While other courses in the district suffered significant tree damage, 13th Beach escaped the worst of it and only the bunkers that hadn't been touched as part of the CIP works were left holding water. The storm was accompanied by an impressive lightning show that lasted for hours, but thankfully the irrigation system and course were spared any hits. While the rain did green up the course a little and detracted from the drier links look that he would have preferred, as Hewitt attests he was grateful for it given the conditions in the final round.

**ALWAYS IMPROVING**

For the tournament, Hewitt's crew expanded to 25 with volunteers coming from nearby clubs

*Taylor Moore prepares the wasteland on tournament hole 8 ahead of the third round*

including Barwon Heads, The Sands Torquay and Portarlington. Craig Molloy, superintendent at neighbouring Barwon Heads, and Toro also loaned additional mowing equipment, while GTS (through Andrew Boyle) supplied the crew with tournament shirts.

Greens were rolled on the Thursday prior to tournament week to get speeds to 11', with speed then managed with a morning triplex cut at 3mm and handwatering as required. Hewitt says they have never used a roller the week of the event as they tend to have issues with green speed increasing on its own accord and then have trouble slowing them down after being cut daily for two weeks.

Fairways were cut at 10mm and tees and aprons cut at 7mm. The Beach Course fescue fairways stood up well to the drying conditions over the week and the compromised irrigation uniformity caused by the strong winds.

"All staff did an amazing job again of presenting the courses to the best of our ability and worked well as a team to collectively strive for a common goal," says Hewitt. "Assistants James Widdowson and Ash Hobson did a great job driving the day-to-day aspect of the operation.

"It's a big week for the team – we have to cater for a 36-hole Pro-Am shotgun, four-tee starts Thursday and Friday and the final rounds on the Beach Course. We also had the All Abilities golfers playing their championship on the Saturday and Sunday on the Creek Course as well as Junior Girls Foundation event on our short course Saturday.

"We did have a few things that we'll look to improve upon on for next time, in particular our 7mm fescue aprons. We cored them in November with the material rubbed back into the profile as a way of managing thatch. We do this every three years and it's enough to dilute



*The fairway crew cut the Creek Course 10th at 10mm. The Creek Course hosted play during the opening two rounds as well as the All Abilities championship over the weekend*

the thatch in our low nitrogen management of the fine fescue.

"For the tournament, however, the core holes were still noticeable and while in most cases it did not affect ball roll it was clear that some areas needed additional growth for recovery. We have experimented with topdressing and not topdressing the cored fine fescue and in both cases the lush green growth into the core holes appears in both scenarios, so we choose to use the sand in the profile as a means to dilute thatch and not fill all holes.

"We also had trouble finding the right opportunity to spray the couch out of the aprons as it requires no golfers, no dew, no wind and no mowers! This continues to be one of our challenges even though we know the benefit of such an application. Last year



*Greens were handwatered only ahead of the final round to mitigate the strong winds forecast for later that day*

the aprons were the best they had been since the gradual transition from bentgrass and massive amounts of couch encroachment. Low nitrogen strategy is also part of our Poa management in a surface that we now have no chemical control of." 🌱





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