



Leongatha Golf Club is beautifully routed through a natural bush setting with an abundance of native vegetation and wildlife

Leongatha GC, VIC

Leongatha Golf Club truly deserves the tag of being one of Australian golf's hidden regional gems. In charge of the maintaining the Vern Morcom design is Dylan McMeekin who has spent his entire 21-year career at the South Gippsland club.

Superintendent: Dylan McMeekin (41).

Nickname: Bob.

Family: Wife Louise, children Milla and Oliver.

Period as a superintendent: Ten years.

Association involvement: VGCSA.

Turf management career: Started as an apprentice at Leongatha Golf Club 21 years ago and have been here ever since.

Qualifications: Certificate III Horticulture/Turf.

Major hobbies/past-times: Cricket, golf, basketball, footy, fishing and kids.

Where is Leongatha Golf Club and what is the course/town known for: Leongatha is based about 135km south east of Melbourne along the South Gippsland Highway. The golf club is actually about 15 minutes southwest of the main township on the way to Inverloch.



Tell us a bit about your background and how you started out in the turf industry.

I played golf occasionally with mates in my teens and enjoyed the challenge. The presentation of a golf course always interested me, so when the apprenticeship position came up at Leongatha after I had just finished school I thought I would give it a crack and find out how it was done. I love the job and outdoors... the rest is history.

Who were some of your early mentors and what did they teach you about the industry and turf management? I spent my first 10 years working under superintendent Steve Earle who had great knowledge coming from

The Leongatha GC crew (from left) Tom Sorrell, superintendent Dylan McMeekin and Denis McDonald

As well as more intensive renovations, throughout the year Leongatha's greens are groomed then dusted every 2-3 weeks and vertidraind when time allows

Huntingdale Golf Club. Former Huntingdale superintendent John Spencer, who was a member of the club, also helped us out prior to his death. This was when I learnt you only get out what you put in. It was during this time the club was successful in converting all fairways and tees to Santa Ana couch. Both Steve and John also taught me how to prepare quality turf on a small budget and, most importantly, to trust your gut feelings.

How has the course change since the early days of your apprenticeship?

When I first started the club was struggling financially and not a lot of money had been spent on the course. The course had a great Vern Morcom-designed bush layout, but the playing surfaces were cool-season, greens were predominantly *Poa annua*, the tees were uneven, irrigation was all manual and machinery old.

Since then we have slowly rebuilt, levelled and turfed the tees with Santa Ana couchgrass, converted all fairways to couch between 2005 and 2007 and changed the greens to predominantly bentgrass (Pennncross/Penneagle). We have also started a vegetation plan managing overgrown trees and undergrowth, reshaped all bunkers, set up a machinery replacement plan replacing most machinery and most recently upgraded the irrigation system on greens and tees.

Give us an overview of Leongatha GC and some of its unique characteristics from a course perspective?

The course has long been regarded as a 'hidden gem'. It has been carved out of the natural bushland surrounding with large trees and thick undergrowth vegetation lining every hole. We are very lucky to have a lot of wildlife that call our course home and they are regularly seen by golfers. The greens are tricky, fairways are wide, have great shape and definition, the roughs are rough and the vegetation is thick. It is a challenge if you hit it off line. We also have heaps of water so if it gets dry we can water as much as we need.

What are some of the unique features about Leongatha GC from a turf management perspective?

Having so many trees that impact turf through shade, airflow and tree roots provides us with year-round management challenges. Having our irrigation dam 800 metres off the course and using travelling irrigators on fairways is always



interesting too. All greens are push-up constructions with some of them more than 60-years-old. Most greens slope from back to front so we have to be careful with green speeds not going over 9'8" on the stimpmeter otherwise they become unfair.

Is it an easy/hard facility to manage? What's the most challenging aspect?

It can be challenging for sure. Finding staff and having a small budget can make it hard at times. Our irrigation dam is off course and can have elevated sodium levels so we are always monitoring. All fairways are only manually irrigated with travelling irrigators or hoses, so it's hard to get water out when you need to.



Take us through your turf management operations there. What changes have you implemented in terms of managing the course during your tenure as superintendent?

I felt that I was taught the basics really well, so I have only made small changes. I have increased the use of organic products and now apply compost tea, humic acid, fish and seaweed monthly on greens for disease prevention. I felt a need to reduce the exposure to fungicides and increase soil health. Irrigation water is monitored more regularly and calcium is applied to offset sodium.

Greens renovation practices are more aggressive and consistent. Greens are now cored and scarified twice a year with a big focus on making sure greens are groomed and dusted every 2-3 weeks. I have been fortunate the club has been in a position to continually upgrade and add machinery. We now have much more reliable machinery and healthier turf as a result.

What other maintenance changes do you want to introduce/plan on introducing?

I would like to focus on couch encroachment in greens and green surrounds. Maintaining a pure bent or fine fescue buffer is my goal. A trial is in place but we have a long way to go. Increasing soil health in the fairways is also a priority. If the budget allows it would be nice to keep upgrading irrigation pipe work to allow more sprinklers to be added to the Toro Lynx automatic controller.

A more aggressive and consistent renovation programme has paid significant dividends in the performance and management of Leongatha's bentgrass greens



Among many course projects in recent years, all bunkers have been reshaped and refurbished

Any special environmental considerations that you have to incorporate into the management of the course? We are very lucky that the course setting is natural bush and vegetation has always been there and an integral part of the layout. It has always been our goal to encourage out of play native areas and add some definition to areas through plant length and colour. Having areas that do not get cut regularly helps us to regularly cut the areas that are in play and grow a lot faster. Some out of play areas are only cut once or twice a year.

With the help of Kate Torgersen we have identified a lot of species around the course and have started transplanting plants into areas that have been trafficked or mown out or just need a little help. The most notable area we have worked on is the carry on the par three 14th.

With so many trees and wildlife on course, there is always considerations when spraying herbicides. We do not spray too close to trees and vegetation, especially close to heavy rainfall and golfing events. Run off and tracking can be very visual and dangerous.



What are some of the major challenges facing Leongatha GC both from a turf and general club management perspective?

From a turf management perspective, couch encroachment in greens and green surrounds is becoming a big issue. All greens need work to some degree and we are like many other clubs who have tried many products to overcome this. We have recently built a fine fescue turf nursery and a trial is in place to spray out 1-2 mower widths of surround and re-turf with the fine fescue. A spraying programme will then be in place to control regeneration. Club management issues are more related to keeping membership and golfing numbers consistent from year to year. Over the years they have done a great job considering we have an older member base.

Outline any major course improvement works recently completed and/or highlight any ongoing or future works that the club is undertaking. As mentioned earlier, there have been many projects completed over the last couple of years including reshaping and refurbishment of all bunkers, rebuilding and levelling tees, construction of a turf nursery, drainage across fairways, grading of cart tracks, re-turfing bare areas and tree maintenance to allow more sunlight and airflow.

McMeekin relies on volunteers and working bees to keep Leongatha in the condition it is renowned for. Among the regulars (left) are Peter Seth and club president Peter Waters



The most recent major upgrade was to the irrigation system. The club was lucky enough to receive a grant that significantly helped fund the project. The project was many years in planning and the main aim of it was to automate the greens, tees, fairway hydrants, new pumps, foot valve and pump shed. We now have an excellent Toro Lynx control system, Infinity sprinklers on greens, T5s and T7s on tees, Grundfos pumps and the ability to add to the system when funds allow. Now completed, this project has significantly saved many man hours, power costs and reduced the inconvenience to golfers.

More irrigation works are planned with mainline upgrades and sprinklers to be added on par 3 approaches. Fairway irrigation is being investigated on the 5th and 6th holes to eliminate the need of travelling irrigators. Transporting irrigators on the slopes we have here can be very challenging.

Water is obviously a critical issue for any golf course. How is Leongatha GC faring in the water management stakes? We are very lucky that we have a large dam we use for irrigation. Even though it is off site, we have more water than we can put out. It is feed by run off and over flows every year, touch wood!

The weather and climate is always a great leveller for a course superintendent. How has Mother Nature treated the course in recent times? As all superintendents know, Mother Nature and weather forecasts are always hard to deal with. Every day, week, month and year is different. Some members don't seem to understand this as they compare course conditions year to year and expect the same conditions day to day.

When applying any fertiliser, pesticides or pre-emergents on fairways it is always timed around rainfall washing it in as the travelling irrigators take too long. When you want 6mm you will get 20mm and then you want 20mm

but only get 2mm. Other times you get nothing and the irrigators have to go out to wash in, taking seven days to water all fairways. Unfortunately we need to rely on the weather too much to get good product results.

The one product I couldn't manage my course without is... Primo Maxx. It's a must with small staff and only one fairway mower to maintain 13 hectares of Santa Ana couch. It is a huge advantage over the busy summer holiday season reducing cutting time and clippings. It just makes the course present so much better.

Do you use volunteers to assist with the management of the course and if so how important a resource are they? With only three staff, the only way we survive presenting the course to a high standard is with the assistance of volunteers. I am lucky to have Peter Seth, Leon Collier and president Peter Waters as my two-day-a-week regulars. They are great and do any job that needs doing. We also regularly call monthly working bees and are open to volunteers coming out whenever they can, even if it's only for an hour or two.

I focus on having a small group who rotate cutting rough when needed, another group that can help cut fairways and the others helping out with various tasks such as filling sand bins, divotting tees, emptying bins, blowing, trimming sprinkler heads, cleaning up fallen trees/limbs, spot spraying and maintaining around the clubhouse. Volunteers are always welcome.

What have you got in your shed? Mainly red. 2 x Toro 3250, Toro 6500, Toro 5510, Toro 3280 rough cutter, Toro Multi Pro 1250, Toro 5040 bunker machine, Toro Pro Force blower, 2 x Toro MDX Workmans, Toro Flex 2100, John Deere 4410, John Deere 4105 loader, Tru Turf R52 roller, Dakota 410 topdresser, Vertidrain 7215, Graden GS04 scarifier, Ryan turf cutter, Silvan 1000L 6m boom, Rayco 6-inch chipper, Mitsubishi tipper.

What's your favourite piece of machinery and what's on the wish list? The Toro Multi Pro 1250 sprayer is accurate, easy to use and saves so much time. We are very lucky that a machinery plan was put in place to continually update machines and over the last 10 years nearly every machine has been replaced. The next machine to be purchased will be a newer Toro Multi Pro 1250 or a Toro HDX workman. Both machines are valuable and will make the job quicker and easier. The wish list also has a



The most recent project at Leongatha has seen a major upgrade to the tees and greens irrigation system

excavator on it – could help with so many jobs around the course.

What are some pros and cons of being a regional superintendent? The cost of getting products delivered has to be factored into the budget. The time it takes products to get here can be an issue if needed straight away. I would like to attend more information days and seminars but the time and distance is often too far. It is always good driving to and from work with no traffic.

Are expectations of course presentation and conditioning any less than that placed on your metropolitan counterparts? I do not think they are less. All clubs have expectations. I would think most would understand our location, budget and staff restraints. Over the last couple of years I am finding the expectations are getting higher as more members are joining from metropolitan areas.



If you could change one thing about your job as a regional superintendent what would it be and why? Bigger budget and more staff obviously. The course is located 15 minutes from Leongatha so a course closer to town would mean less travelling to pick up parts and products. Apart from that, the club is going in the right direction, staff are great and the course is one members enjoy and most can see how far it has come.

Do you think regional/country superintendents have a better work-life balance than their metro counterparts? I have not been a metro super, but from those I know they are all passionate and spend long hours when needed. I am lucky to have a good work-life balance.

How important are the relationships you have with other course supers/trade reps? Very important. The reps that call on us are

all very knowledgeable and always willing to help. They have a lot of experience being ex-superintendents and understand our issues. Quite often bringing products with them saves freight and time. Talking to guys like this is a way to further your knowledge without leaving the course.

What are some of the more unusual requests/things you have had to do as a superintendent of a regional course? We had a competition where goal posts were put up at the start of the first fairway – if you 'hit' a goal you got bonus points! Watching Denis go for a swim in the dam to clean the foot valve is always funny.

Favourite spot on your course? The 14th tee looking towards the green. Natural native vegetation can be seen from the tee to an elevated green with bunkers. You can also look back down the 13th with a smile.



Uniquely, Leongatha's main 50ML irrigation dam lies some 800m outside the course boundary

Best advice you have received about being a course superintendent/greenkeeper? You always get complaints no matter how good the course is. Stick to what you know and trust your own ability.

What is the most challenging aspect of a superintendent's role today? Maintaining the course to a set level with only a certain amount of available man hours. Also, the increase in

paperwork and WHS demands requires more time in the office and less on course.

What have you worked on personally in recent years to improve your skills as a superintendent? Continually trying to further my knowledge by talking to other superintendents, reps and always reading. Also making sure communication with all staff on course and in the clubhouse is improving.

What gives you the most job satisfaction? Seeing the course continually improving to a standard members and visitors appreciate and hearing their positive feedback.

Most pleasing/rewarding moment at Leongatha? To finally upgrade our irrigation. To see new pumps, greens and tee sprinklers on the Toro Lynx controller was amazing. The end result made all the hard work worth it and meant goodbye to 3am manual watering! 🙌

AT A GLANCE – LEONGATHA GOLF CLUB, VIC

Course specs: 5785 metre par 70. Greens and surrounds one hectare in size. Greens are Pennncross/Penneagle bentgrass with bentgrass/fine fescue surrounds. Santa Ana tees (0.8ha) and fairways (13ha), 18 bunkers and a 1500m² fine fescue nursery.

Members/rounds: 550/22,000.

Major tournaments/events: Club championships (October), four-day annual tournament (November), Trainee Pro-Am and South Gippsland Classic (both February).

Annual course budget: \$95K.

Staff structure: Dylan McMeekin (superintendent), Denis McDonald and Tom Sorrell.

Annual rainfall: 1000mm.

Soil types: Sand, sandy loam, soil, clay and coffee rock.

Water sources/irrigation system: 50 megalitre irrigation dam (fed by run off) located 800m from 5th green with 30m head. Two Grundfos 18.5kw pumps, Grundfos dosing pump, Amiad auto flush filter. Toro Lynx controller with Infinity back-to-back sprinklers on greens, T5 and T7 sprinklers on tees. Four travelling irrigators and hoses used for fairways.

Cutting heights: Greens 3-3.5mm, surrounds 10-12mm, tees 8-10mm, fairways 12-14mm and rough 2.5 inches.

Renovations: Our greens reno programme is carried out in November and end of February. Process is to scarify with a pedestrian

Graden to a depth of 30mm, push off with bunker machine blade then blow off, core with Vertidrain using 17mm fairway tines to a depth of eight inches, sand and rub in. We then Vertidrain with 8mm solid tine blocks at a depth of 10 inches, shaking in the sand and making more holes, rub in sand, blow, add amendments and water. During the year, greens are groomed then dusted every 2-3 weeks and vertidrain when time allows. There is no vertidrain after May as surface is sealed and firm.

Tees are scarified with a pedestrian Graden every second or third year depending



While greens and tees are controlled by the new irrigation system, Leongatha's fairways are still manually watered with travelling irrigators

on their condition and weather. Fairways receive minimal fertility and irrigation and get hit hard over winter (dormancy), so every year we take a conservative approach. Renovation can either be light grooming, verti-raking, decking at a lower height, scarifying, spiking/slitting or just leaving.

Major disease pressures: In the past we have sprayed for pythium, brown patch and dollar spot. We are now using phosphites and more organic products with excellent results. The biggest success we have had is using monthly applications of a brewed compost tea. This has reduced our fungicide applications by 70 per cent while also increasing our soil health.

Nutrition management: On greens our focus has been to use more organic products to help with our compost tea microbiology. Seaweed, fish, humic acid and amino acids are applied monthly.

Nitrogen inputs are low and only applied when needed as we try and keep any *Poa annua* unhealthy and are finding the organics to be enough. Calcium will be applied three times during the year to offset sodium in the irrigation water.

When it comes to fairways, they receive very little. We make a mix of extreme green iron and magnesium that is applied for colour and extended definition during December and January. I am currently working to increase fertility on fairways if the budget allows.



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