

Land of the Long White Cloud



AETERO, pronounced (a-er-t-er-ro-er), is the Maori word for New Zealand and means the Land of the Long White Cloud. New Zealand, with its population of 3.3 million, and 70 million sheep has more golf courses per head of population than any other country in the world. North Island, with its capital of New Zealand, windy Wellington, has a sub-tropical climate to the north of Auckland.

Auckland Golf Club is possibly the most prestigious, where a visitor can only play in the company of a member, and where membership fees are the most expensive in the country. The course superintendent, Laurie Cochrane, who has only recently taken up the post, has a big reconstruction programme ahead. The sand green construction programme has already started, and it is planned to complete three greens every summer with Penncross.

A sand turf nursery supplies all the turf for the greens. The nursery is presently 1,500 square metres, and will be increased to 2,100 next autumn. Once turf has been removed from the nursery, re-sowing can be easily effected using an

undersowing operation. The root mat from the previous crop binds the sand surface sufficiently for grooves to be cut, into which the seed falls. Penncross turf seems well suited to the hot summers and warm winters of Auckland. Temperatures rarely fall below the 40s Fahrenheit and frosts, if any, disappear very early in the morning. Most courses in New Zealand have greens with a Brown Top and Penncross mixture and some suffer Poa invasion. Water for both greens and tees at Auckland is drawn from a large pond located on the course, which is supplied with water piped from an underground water hole. Virtually all courses are cut using triplex machines, mainly Toro and Jacobson. Pedestrian machines are rarely seen, due to an insufficiency of labour. Cutting height ranged between 3 and 4 millimeters.

Welcomed

I was made most welcome at Auckland by the secretary, John Hutt, who showed me round the impressive clubhouse. I was interested to learn that, in order to become captain of the club, a member

Above: Queenstown Golf Club

must serve 12 years on the committee. Not only status, but age, count for becoming captain. The club has been host to the New Zealand Open, but due to the present programme of course works, it will be at least five years before it does so again.

North Island has some very picturesque courses, none more so than Waitangi, which overlooks the Pacific Ocean, and from which the views are breathtaking. Titirangi, which hosts the Air New Zealand/Shell Open, was described by the American professional Al Geiberger as "the longest short course" he had ever played. It is in a beautiful location surrounded by magnificent areas of native trees and shrubs, and is rich in bird life.

The Bay of Plenty, the centre of the province of Rotorua, is a spectacular thermal area, where Arikikapakapa course (known as Whaka) has extinct mud pools, and steam vents which sometimes burst unexpectedly into life. Many courses in the North Island have Ponga (Silver Fern)

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Above: A short hole at Auckland Golf Club

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growing there, this being the national emblem of New Zealand. These ferns can grow ten metres in height, and are used as fence posts.

Travelling down to South Island, where the climate is very similar to our own. I had the pleasure of meeting several greenkeepers from the Christchurch area, and was invited to accompany them to Lancaster Park, the venue for the first Test Match against England, to see at first hand how a Test Wicket is prepared. Although practices for the preparation of cricket wickets differ from those required for golf greens, the pressures involved in trying to create a perfect surface are very similar to those we know so well in greenkeeping.

Top courses

Christchurch and Russley are the two top courses, and I was fortunate to be able to play both. I found each had Brown Top greens with a little Poa Annua, which seemed very common throughout the South Island. Richmond Hill, a little nine hole course, was the exception, with fescue/bent greens. The course, built on the side of a hill, had fencing around the greens to keep the sheep off. Interestingly, there were two holes to each green, a red flag in one hole and a yellow in the other, thus creating the 18 holes for the course. Christchurch has the proud

distinction of having Bob Charles as an Honorary Member, this being granted following his victory in the 1963 Open Championship. Russley was in magnificent condition. Walter, the head greenkeeper, has a very comprehensive watering system which is supplied from an old river that runs under the course. The north-west wind that blows in from Australia is a greenkeeper's nightmare. This wind can blow at 30-40mph with temperatures in the 40s Centigrade, which dries everything out in a matter of hours. It then requires days of watering for the course to recover.

Similar

Greenkeeping practices in the South Island are very similar to our own. The greens are cut with a Triplex (I never saw a pedestrian mower anywhere) to a height of 4mm, and the frequency varying between four and six times a week. Top dressing takes place monthly, mainly with sand, and sprayed with sulphate of ammonia and iron. Wetting agents are used to help prevent dry patch, although some courses do still suffer from this. Moving further South brings you to the Otago Province, which comprises two distinct regions. Around the coast the land is green, and the air moist and misty. Inland from this coastal fringe there is a dry, brown, mountainous upland. Otago has the distinction of being the first Province in

which golf was played. Dunedin was the proud inheritor of the Scottish National Game, and developed there from the early 1870's.

Wanaka and Queenstown stand out as the best of the courses, enjoying clear mountain air and impressive views.

Queenstown has large boulders landscaped around the greens and tees - effective but somewhat hazardous.

Alexandra Golf Club has the unique distinction of never closing, despite experiencing great extremes in temperature. The sandy base provides for rapid drainage, and a complete watering system irrigates the course during the summer scorchers.

In 1932 a group of greenkeepers formed the New Zealand Greenkeepers Association. The formation of this association, its annual conference and a diploma course were all designed to build up the standards and expertise in the industry. Sadly, some 56 years later, the association still faces problems of low membership, and this in spite of a fee of only \$15 (about £6), for which the benefits are numerous. Travelling to New Zealand made me realise that wherever one goes around the world we greenkeepers are all engaged in shaping the future of our profession.

**by Brian Turner,
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